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Cover Page: Refugees in Somalia
UNHCR/J. Anton

CAMBODIA: ***HOMEWARD BOUND***
After 17 years of war and exile, some 350,000 Cambodian refugees are returning to their country in the largest and most complex repatriation operation in UNHCR history. ***20***

KENYA: ***THE BIRTH OF A CRISIS***
Refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia are fleeing war and famine, hoping to find relief in Kenya. Too many end up in the midst of a bad dream, in overcrowded camps with little water, food problems and insecurity. ***26***

BANGLADESH: ***IN THE EYE OF A STORM***
It is cyclone season in Bangladesh. For the 225,000 Myanmar refugees, the arrival of the storms and the ensuing monsoon rains can only mean more misery. ***29***

YUGOSLAVIA: ***A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY***
The future holds unanswered questions for people displaced by the Yugoslav conflict. Securing the safe return and reintegration of people forced from their homes after the guns are silenced will be difficult. ***32***

SOUTH AFRICA: ***FACING REALITY***
UNHCR has endured a fair share of confusion after overcoming outright hostility from several quarters in its operation to bring back political exiles. Returnees are finding it difficult to make a new life in a situation of high unemployment and inflation. ***34***

ISSUES
SAFE COUNTRY? SAYS WHO? ***37***
WOMEN SPEAK OUT ***39***

PARTNERS
IRC: A NO FRILLS NGO ***41***

FEATURES
STAFF ECHOES ***43***
REFUGEE VOICES ***44***
SONY INITIATIVE ***46***

E N T S

SPECIAL REPORT

REFUGEES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

LIMITING THE WASTELANDS

Preserving the environment has become a very important item on UNHCR's agenda. Replanting forests and reducing dependence on fragile surroundings are part of a program to deal with the ecological degradation created by mass movements.

4

CARRYING A HEAVY LOAD

Deforestation around refugee camps in Zimbabwe has become critical. With no access to other fuel sources, refugees have rapidly depleted supplies of deadwood around their settlements and have to travel vast distances to gather firewood.

8

THE INHOSPITABLE EARTH

The earth is becoming less habitable. Natural and man-made disasters have displaced millions of people. Growing environmental degradation could create even larger population displacements that the world community is ill-equipped to prevent.

12

MONEY TREES IN PAKISTAN

An ambitious reafforestation project in Pakistan combines environmental rehabilitation with income-generating activities for Afghan refugees.

16

GREENING LA MOSQUITIA

A UNHCR project has not only revived forests damaged by refugees in Honduras, it has also helped stop slash-and-burn agricultural methods traditionally employed by Miskito Indians.

18

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SPECIAL REPORT

REFUGEES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A camp in Sudan: many refugees live in arid and semi-arid areas of the poorest countries in the world

Limiting the wastelands

Hartisheik, a refugee camp surrounded by a vast wasteland, is an environmentalist's nightmare.

As many as 250,000 Somalis, fleeing civil war, swarmed into Ethiopia's arid Ogaden region in 1988. They cut down trees and bushes for wood with which to cook food and build frames to support the plastic sheeting that forms their *tukuls*.

In the process, wide stretches of vegetation vanished. Soon the refugees were traveling farther and farther away to collect fuelwood. After a recent inspection flight over Hartisheik, Josef Auer, a UNHCR consultant, reported that "no vegetation can be seen in the vicinity of the camp for miles."

"There is just a huge concentric circle of sand and gravel," he said. "The area has been stripped clean of trees, bushes and every bit of deadwood."

The description of Hartisheik's surroundings could apply to scores of other refugee camps in dozens of countries around the world.

Environmental conservation has become an important item on UNHCR's agenda. Reviving damaged forests, carefully selecting camp sites, removing dependence on fragile surroundings are all part of a program gradually being adopted to deal with ecological degradation triggered by mass movements.

The strategy for renewal began with a campaign within the organization to promote awareness of environmental issues. Some programs now provide fuel and stoves in an attempt to discourage refugees from felling trees for firewood, while others include reafforestation initiatives.

Pakistan, which hosts the world's largest single refugee population, now has a $86.6 million project with a large reafforestation component which is being executed by the World Bank and the Pakistan government with funds raised by UNHCR. Similar projects on a modest scale have been undertaken in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Malawi and Honduras.

The campaign to cope with ecological problems besetting refugees is expected to receive a major boost as UNHCR prepares to participate in the June summit of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro.

Preparations for the summit could provide the opportunity to draw up an environmental policy. But with competing demands for limited resources, activities which do not address life-threatening situations are bound to receive a lower priority.

"Any policy on safeguarding the environment will require a commitment for additional resources to cover increased program costs," said Yvette Stevens, Chief of UNHCR's Program and Technical Support Section.

It is generally agreed that the Office can no longer ignore environmental destruction around refugee sites.

Some officials also point to the restrictions imposed by UNHCR's mandate. Many donor governments have, in the past, questioned UNHCR's ability to undertake large-scale environmental rehabilitation projects which could be regarded as development. But it is generally agreed that the Office can no longer ignore environmental destruction around refugee sites.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata told an UNCED preparatory committee meeting last September that "environmental degradation has increasingly become both a cause and a symptom of population movements."

"The majority of refugees today are to be found in arid and semi-arid areas of the poorest countries of the world. The concentration of large populations in such areas leads to a tremendous strain on these fragile environments and on the meagre resources available. On the other hand, such environments are hostile to refugees and can affect their health and well-being," she said.

In emergency situations, the immediate focus of relief agencies always has been the urgent needs for food, water and shelter. As long as there were bushes within sight, no-one ever asked where starving refugees would get the three tons of firewood needed to cook each ton of wheat and beans supplied by humanitarian agencies.

"It takes three to four hours to cook beans if you don't soak them in water for a whole night," said UNHCR nutritionist Rita Bhatia. "Refugees don't have enough water to do this. Lack of water forces them to gather more fuelwood."

So forests are denuded. Soil erosion results. Badly needed watersheds are damaged. Increased runoff and reduced water infiltration leads to drying up of groundwater resources, mudslides and siltation of rivers, lakes and irrigation canals.

Trees wither and die. With no protection from wind and rain, refugees are exposed to the elements. Women and children suffer the most because it is they who are often saddled with the task of collecting firewood. They spend long hours traveling vast distances. Their health suffers and they are easy prey for marauders and bandits.

According to Stevens, the refugee contribution to the degradation of the environment in a global context is very small. But it is highly visible in areas affected by mass movements because of the sudden increase in population densities. At a local or regional level, the result can be devastating to both refugees and the local population.

"Economizing on refugee assistance in the short term may be prohibitively costly on the environment in the long run," the High Commissioner told the 42nd session of the Executive Committee.

UNHCR/H. Hoffmann

Iraqi refugees in Turkey: after the crisis, the clean-up of knee-deep garbage

"We need to give greater consideration to environmental issues in our assistance activities. Degradation of the environment may lead to displacement and displacement may cause further degradation of the environment."

Stevens affirms that UNHCR and its implementing partners are responsible for taking preventive measures to lessen and repair the environmental damage caused around refugee sites.

Nevertheless, UNHCR's moves to preserve the environment are based on individidual rather than institutional initiatives. "We do what we can but it is always on an *ad hoc* basis because no clear policy exists and funds are usually limited," said Stevens.

In some countries, UNHCR has supplied stoves and kerosene and provided tents and building materials to reduce demand for wood. It promotes the use of properly installed latrines and disposal of human waste.

Last summer after more than 100,000 Iraqi refugees returned home from Isikveren camp in Turkey, UNHCR undertook to clean the area which was literally knee-deep in empty packaging, plastic water bottles and other garbage.

However, little effort has been put into designing environmental protection programs that can be quickly implemented at the start of a refugee crisis or mass movement. In some cases, UNHCR is constrained by the priorities of host governments and cannot dictate policy to them, particularly when it comes to specifying camp sizes. Host governments are often reluctant to limit camp populations in order to relieve pressure on fragile environments.

The biggest worry for ecologists studying refugee movements is the large-scale deforestation that could, if not controled, lead to climatic change and drought.

Environmental analysts are just beginning to join forces with migration and refugee experts to identify threatened habitats likely to produce mass movements. They are pointing to large areas of eastern and southern Africa now reeling under the worst drought in at least 10 years.

The analysts say drought, exacerbated by civil conflict, could lead to widespread deaths from starvation and sudden refugee outflows in the Horn of Africa. Kenya, where UNHCR fears it will be assisting 300,000 refugees within three months, is already experiencing the consequences of this fatal combination.

Warfare and drought also have hit Somalia hard, disrupting the supply of seeds, fertilizers and machinery and jeopardizing this year's grain harvest. The Food and Agriculture Organization reports that rural people "have lost or consumed their grain reserves and have to resort to famine food such as sugarcane and wild fruits and berries for their survival."

Cristina Linner, UNHCR food aid coordination officer, said the same drought conditions prevail in southern Africa, threatening some 1 million Mozambican refugees in Malawi. Available food for refugees is expected to be exhausted by July 1992. Malawi expects the worst harvest in 10 years and has warned UNHCR that local supply of maize to the Mozambican refugees may be disrupted.

Environmental analysts are just beginning to join forces with migration and refugee experts to identify threatened habitats.

"This is going to create a very big problem, because there is not enough humanitarian food aid in the world. People are not giving as much as they used too," Linner said.

While UNHCR's priority is the refugees, the Office is finding that it often must feed local people as well or risk its food convoys being attacked and looted.

UNHCR has helped create awareness of environmental problems in the international community, but Stevens argues that a commitment must be made, backed by financing, to resolve them: "We cannot close our eyes to environmental issues. We have to do a lot toward prevention. We cannot hope to compensate entirely for environmental damage, but we can go a long way in ensuring that environmental degradation around refugee sites is reduced."

Ecological damage by refugees sparks projects like tree-planting in Malawi

UNHCR T. Williams

CARRYING A HEAVY LOAD

Five kilometers west of Mazowe River Bridge camp, in northeastern Zimbabwe, a Mozambican woman and her two young daughters hoist substantial bundles of firewood onto their heads. The mother's headload, later measured at 90 kilograms, is the size of an oil drum. It has taken four hours to assemble the wood, and there is a tangible aura of fatigue surrounding the group as they turn towards the fearsome sun and begin their long journey home. The youngest girl, a 7-year-old who would like to be in school, trips and scatters her load. Her face screws up, and hot tears of anger and frustration stream down her cheeks.

For many of the refugee women in the five camps in Zimbabwe, this is a daily chore. It interferes with their other activities, it prevents them from attending skills-training or adult literacy classes, it keeps the young girls away from school and it places an unacceptable burden on their lives. But still it must be done. Without a fire to cook on, the maize meal they receive as their staple diet is worthless.

Amongst many of the Mozambican cultural groups, there is a traditional taboo against the cutting of fruit trees. It takes a great deal of courage, and no small amount of desperation, to break a taboo such as this, but as one refugee from Nyangombe camp said, "When there are no other trees left, what alternatives do we have?" In this case, the answer is none.

The fuelwood shortage, and concomitant deforestation around these camps, has reached crisis proportions. With no access to other fuel sources, the refugees, some of whom have been in the camps since 1984, have rapidly depleted the resources of deadwood around the camps, and are now obliged to cut down living trees. Each day, the distances covered increase. Women from the local communities suffer likewise, and the relationship between the refugees and their hosts is strained by the competition for increasingly scarce resources.

The environmental impact of concentrated and sustained fuelwood foraging around the camps is incalculable. In most cases, the surrounding areas have been very visibly denuded: parts of Mazowe River Bridge and Nyamatikiti camps are almost completely treeless. Though no definitive studies have been undertaken, refugees themselves have pointed to the many visible signs of environmental degradation occurring in the area, including the siltation of the Mazowe River. Five years ago this was a healthy, flowing river. Now at the height of the dry season, it is little more than a series of shallow, fetid pools.

There is, furthermore, an accumulating body of evidence worldwide to suggest that severe deforestation can have very adverse effects on the microclimate. Reduced rainfall, soil erosion and river siltation combine to cut agricultural output, often very dramatically. Eventually, the land becomes untenable for even the most basic forms of agriculture, and is thereby rendered useless.

The environmental impact of concentrated and sustained fuelwood foraging around the camps is incalculable.

Earlier this year, together with the appropriate government authorities and UNHCR, a group of NGOs active in the camps formed a consortium to tackle the problem. It was recognized by all members that the problem was too big for any one organization to deal with on its own, and that a coordinated and collaborative effort was required for immediate action to be effected.

The Fuelwood Crisis Consortium now has some 15 members, and has formulated a two-year program to tackle the critical situation that has arisen. It aims to reduce the very severe shortages of firewood currently found in and around the Mozambican refugee camps in Zimbabwe, and at the same time to alleviate the extreme physical burden experienced by women refugees in the collection of that firewood.

There is a strong feeling amongst the Consortium's members that this is a program that should have been undertaken some years ago.

"The unnaturally high concentrations of population in a refugee camp are a recipe for ecological disaster," said Samuel Miribindi, Commissioner for Refugees of the Zimbabwe Department of Social Welfare. "Of course, when the camps were first established in 1984, nobody believed they would still be here eight years on, but they are. For the sake of the refugees, the host community and the environment they share between them, it is time we took some positive action."

In more ways than one, the proposed program will break new ground for these organizations. Few of them have experience in environmental activities, and even fewer in working together towards a common goal. However, there is a mood of buoyancy among them that seems to say "if we are to recognize a new direction in refugee work, this program must succeed." Some have their doubts, but they have enlisted the support of a number of Zimbabwe's leading environmentalists, and every step is fully researched before implementation.

So what exactly is the program and how quickly can the refugees derive benefits from it?

The Consortium is addressing the problem from a number of different angles. Firstly, pilot studies have shown that the consumption of fuelwood can be reduced very significantly through the introduction of fuel-efficient stoves. In this case, the stove it plans to use is a low mass, portable stove, commonly found in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, that has been shown to reduce the consumption of firewood for cooking by as much as 60 percent.

"By the end of 1993, we hope that every woman in the camps will have, and be using, her own *Tsotso* (meaning 'twigs' in Shona) stove," said Rhoda Immerman, Consortium chairperson. "The stoves will be assembled in the camps through existing metalworking projects, and full facilities for their repair and maintenance will be established."

At the same time, the Consortium will embark on an extensive reafforestation exercise in and around the camps, both to replace the trees that have already been cut down and to provide for the future needs of the refugees and the local communities. The main emphasis of this will be on the use of indigenous trees, and the development, among both groups, of the skills necessary for their propagation.

Linking these two components will be a comprehensive environmental awareness campaign, targeted at the schools and all women within the camps. The focal point here will be the use of appropriate woodland management practices, building on the knowledge that virtually all these refugees already have.

"Finally, we plan to document the program and generate sufficient data to be able to assist in the establishment of similar programs elsewhere," said Mrs. Immerman.

As soon as they receive the stoves, the women should start to find their firewood collecting trips are less frequent and that time will become available for other activities. Trees they plant obviously won't mature tomorrow, but the reduced pressure on and improved management of those that are standing should slowly begin to augment supply. Ultimately the Consortium hopes that demand and supply will reach a level of equilibrium that would largely obviate the current deforestation.

None of the Consortium members harbors illusions that this will be an easy task. What provides the impetus is the knowledge that this is responding to a very real and immediate need, and one that the refugees themselves are voicing more and more frequently.

The involvement of both the refugees and the local communities is being stressed at all times. Various different stoves were tested in the camps to judge acceptability, ease of use and efficiency, and it was the users themselves who ultimately opted for the *Tsotso* stove.

Similarly, no one wants to go in and begin planting exotic trees that tests elsewhere have shown are well adapted to the local environment, unless the refugees and local communities have themselves specifically asked for these trees. Generally, exotic trees require greater care than indigenous species, care that will not be given unless the trees are wanted.

To get round this, Consortium personnel will begin by undertaking a study of the indigenous ecological knowledge in each camp, to provide inventories of local tree species, their end uses, the quality of their wood, their reproductive cycle and the local climatic conditions affecting their growth. Only after this, and in consultation with the refugees and local community members, can the choice of which species to grow be made.

A question often asked of Consortium members concerns the likelihood of a ceasefire in the near future in Mozambique, followed by repatriation of the refugees long before the trees have reached maturity.

"It was precisely this belief that prevented us from doing anything before. However, it is not at all clear that there will be a ceasefire tomorrow, and even if there were that repatriation would begin immediately," said Herbert Zimudzi, deputy program officer for the Consortium. "Furthermore, what we are saying when we plant these trees is that, over the years, deforestation has occurred around the camps and it is our responsibility to try and redress this. After all, it is the host community

who have suffered as much as the refugees, and who will continue to suffer long after the refugees have returned home. One must not forget that, were it not for their hospitality, the refugees could never have come here. We owe it to them, on behalf of the refugees, to do something."

There is a further challenge inherent in the program that the Consortium will have to face. Through the use of the *Tsotso* stove, they aim to reduce, very considerably, the amount of time spent by women refugees collecting firewood.

"The danger exists that women will feel they have simply substituted one form of work (collecting firewood) for another (e.g. skills-training programs)," said Dr. Jerry Salole, sub-region director for Save the Children, USA. "Adult literacy, health education, schooling, agricultural activities and skills-training programs are all possibilities, but perhaps it would be better simply to set the time aside for leisure."

This will become clearer once the program is under way.

There has been a marked trend in development work over the last decade towards ecologically sustainable development. It is encouraging to see this spreading its wings to cover emergency relief as well. Clearly it makes sense, both for the refugees and their host community, to ensure that natural resources are protected and the principles of ecological sustainability adhered to. Anyone involved in refugee work would do well to remember that the destruction of natural resources brings about extremely harsh and immediate problems especially for rural women.

With Zimbabwe suffering the harshest drought in living memory, 1992 promises to be a difficult year for those living in and around these refugee camps. Perhaps the Fuelwood Crisis Consortium will do something to make their lives a little easier.

GUY LE BRETON
Fuelwood Crisis Consortium

THE INHOSPITABLE EARTH

Millions of people in Brazil, the Horn of Africa, Haiti, India and a dozen other countries have been displaced by environmental degradation. Deterioration of agricultural lands, desertification, salinization, water pollution, and natural and man-made disasters are making the earth less and less habitable.

This growing environmental degradation could lead to even larger population displacements that the world community is ill-equipped to prevent or respond to effectively. In turn, migration itself becomes a factor in environmental degradation, particularly when movements are massive, rapid and unplanned.

Migration because of environmental degradation is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, natural disasters, civil conflict, war, persecution, over-population - or a combination of these factors - have caused people to flee from their homes temporarily or permanently because the land on which they live can no longer sustain them. Some of these movements are transnational; others internal.

Some are due primarily to environmental factors, while others are more complex and involve a combination of immediate and long-term issues including economic dislocations, social tensions, armed conflict, human rights violations, the pressures of economic development, population growth and political persecution.

What is more recent - and more alarming - is the potential for mass migration caused by irreversible destruction of the environment. Global warming and resulting rising sea levels, for example, could cause the heavily populated delta regions of Bangladesh, Egypt and other countries to be inundated.

While the worst-case scenarios may still be averted by concerted efforts to preserve the environment, some large-scale movements may be inevitable, given the degree of environmental damage already inflicted on the world.

The most important causes and dynamics of environmental migration are: elemental disruptions, biological disruptions, slow-onset disruptions, accidental disruptions, disruptions caused by development, and environmental warfare. Each category covers a spectrum of disruptions ranging from mild to catastrophic. Environmental migrants are but one class of victims that emerge from the most severe disruptions.

Elemental disruptions include cyclones, volcanoes, earthquakes and other natural disasters. They have a rapid onset and are prompted by climatic or geological forces. Their destructiveness depends more on the number of vulnerable people in the affected area than on their inherent severity. The severity of natural disasters has accelerated during each decade from the 1960s through the 1980s. During the 1960s, 28 million people were affected by such disasters while 64 million were affected during the 1980s. Poor people in developing countries are the most severely affected by natural disasters.

While the worst-case scenarios may still be averted by concerted efforts to preserve the environment, some large-scale movements may be inevitable, given the degree of environmental damage already inflicted on the world.

Slow-onset disruptions have complex root causes in which ecological and human activities interact over extended periods, leaving large numbers of people vulnerable. Global warming, deforestation, land degradation, erosion, salinity, siltation, waterlogging and desertification are among the most prominent geophysical processes in the category of environmental disruptions. These all contribute to drought and famine, which of all environmental disruptions, have the most devastating complications for human and animal populations.

Brazil provides a vivid example: about 20 percent of the 43 million people in northeastern Brazil have left the region, with substantial numbers of other people relocating within the northeast. Much of the movement has been from rural to urban areas and from interior to coastal parts of the region. The most prominent environmental factors affecting this massive population displacement are drought and soil depletion.

Accidental disruptions have become common and inevitable by-products of the industrial revolution. Accidents in the manufacture, transport and application of chemicals have killed or injured thousands of people. Nuclear reactors have killed fewer people, but have caused far more severe environmental disruption and forced more than 100,000 people to flee from their homes because of damage to their immediate environment. Chernobyl and Bhopal are two examples of massive population displacement resulting from accidental disruptions.

Disruptions caused by development programs that create environmental problems also result in migration. As with other categories of environmental disruptions, those caused by development cover a wide range. Dams and irrigation projects may bring benefits to some while causing the displacement of others. In India, about 20 million people have been uprooted by development projects. Irrigation projects alone have displaced about 6.5 million people. Some of these migrants were directly displaced by the projects; others moved as common land and water

were reduced as a result of these projects. In some cases, countries have forced people to relocate to what is considered a more hospitable environment as a means of controlling populations. Ethiopia's resettlement program in the mid 1980s sought to move hundreds of thousands of people into government-controlled areas, leading many to flee to neighboring countries.

Environmental warfare makes the environment a major target of conflict. Environmental deterioration is both a cause and a result of armed conflict and persecution. It is not a coincidence that the countries that feature prominently in any list of the producers of environmental refugees - Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Chad, Afghanistan, Haiti, Honduras and El Salvador - are those experiencing both ecological disasters and armed conflict. As one expert has stated, "unleashing the forces of nature" can be an effective military strategy. Several bombs can destroy a dam which in turn destroys the habitability of an entire region. Migration as a result of such environmental warfare takes two forms: temporary movements to get out of harm's way and permanent movements because of the long-term destruction of habitat.

The decision to move from one's own home is seldom a straightforward one. While a specific event may precipitate the actual movement, a range of complicated factors usually affects the final decision to become uprooted. People will often remain where they are trying to cope with the impact of an environmental disruption until or unless they are unable to do so. The availability of international assistance is a factor that will influence whether people need to move and the places to which they may migrate.

The complex nature of the relationship between the environment and migration raises a number of policy and program issues that are being inadequately addressed at present. Few countries have established policies for handling the overall issue of migration resulting from environmental disruptions. This category of migrants is not covered by most national laws - unless the environmental migrant also meets a recognized definition such as a refugee or a labor migrant.

The international system also does not function very well in relation to this issue. At the heart of the problem are four principal issues: unclear mandates, lack of coordination, lack of resources and seemingly competing or contradictory interests of the organizations concerned with environmental migration.

Unclear mandates impede international actions to address the causes of environmental migration, provide effective early warning of imminent disasters, get assistance and, where needed, protection to the victims of environmental disruptions, or find solutions for those forced to move. No single agency has a clear mandate regarding environmental migration. While a number of intergovernmental organizations have related mandates, none has the clear lead responsibility for addressing this issue.

Most important, international agencies do not have a clear mandate to intervene with governments where governmental actions are precipitating the types of environmental disasters that will lead to large-scale internal or international movements. Both carrots and sticks are needed to encourage more responsible actions on the part of governments.

Lack of coordination has plagued a number of international efforts to provide assistance and protection early in a crisis. With so many potential actors and no one leader, it is particularly important that there be cooperation among the various players in responding to the environmental disruption and resulting movements. Instead, there have been situations where agencies have overlapped in the assistance provided while no agency filled clearly identified needs.

Inadequate resources to respond to environmental emergencies are a further problem in the international system. Needed resources include money and trained staff who can be deployed quickly to provide assistance to victims of environmental disruptions. Resources are needed to help those who can remain at or near the site of the environmental disruption to do so and to reestablish themselves as quickly as possible. Where it is impossible for people to remain, resources are needed to move people in as orderly a way as possible and to find alternative residences and livelihoods for them.

The destructiveness of flooding and other natural disasters depends on the number of vulnerable people affected

Helping people to return to their original homes presents special problems requiring significant resources. In addition to the assistance needed by other returnees, environmental migrants also need help rehabilitating the destroyed environment. Without such rehabilitation, it will be impossible for those fleeing an uninhabitable environment to resume their former lives.

Seemingly competing or contradictory interests of the various actors involved in environmental migration issues impede the development of effective working relationships. For example, some population and environmental groups in developed countries have promoted re-

strictions on immigrant admissions because of a concern that additional population will deplete resources. Some development agencies have been reluctant to join with environmentalists because of worries that environmental concerns will be used to impede development. Human rights groups have generally involved themselves with political and legal rights of individuals, paying little attention to the right to a sustainable environment. Since environmental migration overlaps with each of these areas - environment, migration, development, population and human rights - it is important that the various groups cooperate.

Some steps have been taken in this direction. A recent meeting organized by the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the International Organization for Migration and the Refugee Policy Group brought together participants from the environment and migration refugee fields. A number of organizations have since joined together to discuss this important issue raised in Agenda 21, the blueprint for the 21st century to be adopted by the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Brazil in June.

Ways must be found to enable policy makers and planners to design and implement programs that promote more rational use of the environment. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that, despite all good intentions to remedy environmental policies, large numbers of people will be forced from their homes in the coming years because they will not be able to sustain themselves. With a better understanding of the relationship between the environment and migration, the goal should be to minimize mass environmental movements while handling those that occur with rational, humane policies.

SUSAN FORBES MARTIN
Director,
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MONEY TREES IN PAKISTAN

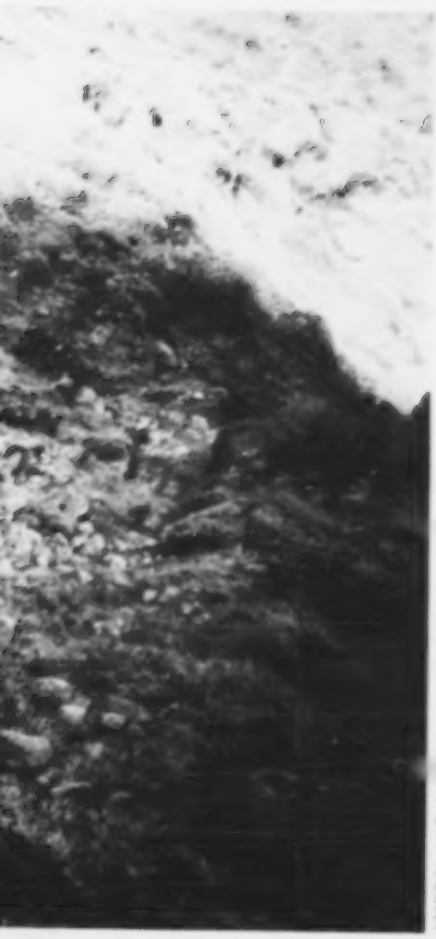
Workers plant trees in a watershed management project designed to arrest soil erosion

More than 3 million Afghans have found refuge in Pakistan over the past 13 years, comprising the largest single refugee population in the world. Not surprisingly, their presence has had a devastating impact on the environment.

Anyone who knew Peshawar, capital of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), before the Afghan refugee influx, would hardly recognize the city now.

Streets are choked with traffic, a thick smog hangs several meters above street level. The hills and mountains to the northwest, where the Khyber Pass marks the Afghan frontier, are barely visible through the haze.

Out in the rural areas of NWFP, where the bulk of the refugees have been living, major environmental damage has been inflicted on Pakistan's already dwindling forest areas, many of which have been completely destroyed. Even the roots of trees, bushes and other plants have been dug out and used as fuel.



This problem, together with those of rangeland management, watershed control, maintenance of access roads and other infrastructural needs, has been addressed over the last eight years by an ambitious $86.6 million, three-phase project, funded by donor countries through the World Bank and UNHCR with the collaboration of the Government of Pakistan. The project combines environmental rehabilitation with income-generating activities for refugees.

The refugees themselves provide 80 percent of the labor force for different aspects of the project, being carried out in NWFP and Baluchistan, Pakistan's two provinces which border Afghanistan, and in the Punjab.

The first two phases of the World Bank project have been successfully completed, and the third phase will commence in the second quarter of 1992, for which full funding has been ensured.

In the Hangu area of NWFP hundreds of acres have been planted with young eucalyptus, acacia or casuarina trees, interspersed with the indigenous "mazri" dwarf palm - a versatile cash crop whose fronds are used in making mats, baskets, caps and shoes.

These activities have provided paid employment to thousands of needy Afghan refugees. The nurseries, where thousands of seedlings grow to become small saplings, provide yet another source of employment not only for refugees working on Forestry Department sites but also for families in refugee villages who nurture a few hundred seedlings each. The families are chosen on the basis of the most needy - widows or disabled refugees - and plant the seedlings with earth in small, aerated plastic bag tubes.

Gul Ahmad, a 40-year-old farmer from Logar province, fled Afghanistan three years ago because of a bombardment. He and his brother, who is disabled, live with their families in a pleasant, small compound in rural Badaber refugee village. Pleasant perhaps because of the hundreds of tree seedlings and small saplings which occupy a central, sheltered part of their compound.

"My wife is glad of the extra income this work provides," he said, as his young daughter watered the plants with a can. "We shall use it to purchase extra food items, such as wheat and oil."

In Badaber, the World Bank project is fostered locally by Norwegian Church Aid. There are 25 family nurseries with eucalyptus and casuarina seedlings in Badaber refugee village alone.

In the broad valleys of NWFP, whole hillsides are dotted with healthy young eucalyptus groves, interspersed with *mazri* dwarf palms. The plantations help to ensure that erosion is checked, watersheds safeguarded and rangelands maintained.

The benefits of this large-scale project are tangible: for Pakistan some much-needed environmental rehabilitation after hosting the world's largest refugee population for 13 years; for Afghan refugees gainful employment (some 13.4 million man-days were worked from 1984 to 1990).

There are longer term benefits too. Most of the Afghans will, sooner or later, go home, with their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Their own country's physical environment will need even more careful and costly rehabilitation than that of Pakistan.

HUGH HUDSON

GREENING LA MOSQUITIA

No roads lead from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, or from any other city, for that matter, to Miskito territory. It can be reached only by small aircraft or by boat and until recently foreigners needed special permission from the government to travel there.

Sheltered between Honduras' Atlantic coast and Nicaragua's desolate border, La Mosquitia is a vast expanse of untamed territory. Its 20,000 square kilometers of pine savannah, tropical forests and swampland are inhabited by only 40,000 people, mainly Miskito Indians living in 175 communities along the ocean and the banks of major rivers.

They make a living from fishing, hunting and subsistence farming of rice, beans, corn, yucca, coconuts and medicinal plants. For too long, they practiced the slash-and-burn method of agriculture, a destructive system that forced them to move to a new area every three years.

For too long, Miskito Indians used the slash-and-burn method of agriculture.

UNHCR/V. Mello

But thanks to its isolation, La Mosquitia's unique ecosystem, home to an extraordinarily rich variety of plants and wildlife, had remained relatively unscathed ... until Nicaraguan Miskitos, fearing forced relocation by the Sandinista government, started pouring across the border in December 1981. By 1986, 16,000 of these refugees were living in open settlements and receiving food and health assistance from UNHCR.

The Honduran government said the refugees had deforested close to 9,000 hectares by collecting firewood, cutting trees to build houses and clearing large expanses to plant rice. Honduran Miskitos were doing the same and worse damage was caused by Honduran entrepreneurs hauling off large quantities of precious tropical wood for export. Deforestation was further aggravated by the distribution of land from forest reserves for agriculture and cattle raising. But the worst devastation by far was due to natural causes. In 1986, a huge fire destroyed 100,000 hectares of forest in a few days. The smoke drifted all the way to Costa Rica.

The Honduran government approached UNHCR to explore the possibility of replanting areas deforested by the refugees. The government's intention was simply to replace the felled trees, but UNHCR hired a forestry expert who quickly realized that mere reafforestation would serve no long-term purpose if refugees and local inhabitants were not trained in agroforestry and soil conservation techniques. Moreover, a study of the area where the refugees were settled showed that only 2,000 hectares had been deforested.

A rather ambitious project was launched in October 1987 with EEC funds totalling $1,188,000. With COHDEFOR (Honduran Corporation for Forestry Development) as its partner, UNHCR reafforested 2,190 hectares in three years and trained 1,279 Miskito refugees and local inhabitants in agroforestry techniques, benefiting 537 Nicaraguan and Honduran Miskito families.

The agroforestry techniques were kept as simple as possible in order to avoid dependence on outside technology. Miskitos were taught how to plant staple crops like corn, beans, yucca and other tubers in areas where young saplings had been planted, thus avoiding waste of land. This technique offered the additional advantage of providing a source of food while preventing the growth of weeds that might stifle the young trees. As long as the saplings weren't tall enough to form a thick canopy blocking out the sunlight, staple crops could be successfully grown.

Other simple techniques included using natural rubber from the trees, using lianas instead of buying rope, making compost to avoid purchasing expensive agro-chemicals, or using the technique of diversified agriculture (i.e. cultivating different species on the same plot of land) to increase resistance to pests thus avoiding the need for pesticides.

Mere reafforestation would serve no long-term purpose if refugees were not trained in agroforestry and soil conservation techniques.

Young Miskito men were taught these simple techniques, once known and practiced by their ancestors but since forgotten, at a school created specifically for that purpose. Graduates then served as a resource base to train others.

The tree nurseries employed almost exclusively women and children because the delicate work required nimble fingers.

"When the Miskito men complained their women were earning the same salaries as they were, we told them that if they didn't like it they could stop working," said Fernando Protti, the UNHCR Program Officer in charge of the project. "That did it. They went back to work and didn't raise the subject again."

The project also encouraged refugees and the local population to raise pigs and chicken in a more efficient manner. This helped to balance their diets while providing a source of income while they waited for the trees to grow enough so they could be sold for lumber. Better breeds were introduced and basic animal husbandry methods replaced the practice of letting animals roam free. Raising pigs and chicken was also far less damaging to the environment than cattle breeding.

The project went beyond reafforestation and training. It involved research, both at the nursery level, where hundreds of thousands of saplings were produced, and at the soil conservation level where crops such as avocado, lemon, pineapple, watermelon, melon and tubers were planted to improve soil use. Miskitos were taught how to use fertilizing beans, a non-edible variety which, by fixing nitrogen, keeps the soil fertile. New agroforestry techniques were developed to improve the quantity and quality of commercial species of saplings. Survival rates for mahogany seeds, for example, reached an unprecedented 60 percent - a valuable contribution to the Honduran economy which relies largely on precious tropical woods for its export earnings. A meteorological station was installed to study the effect of climatic changes on the flowering and fruition of the 12 most important commercial species.

In 1990, following the change of government in Nicaragua, most Nicaraguan Miskitos opted for voluntary repatriation, leaving the reafforestation project terribly understaffed. In order not to lose the benefits of the ongoing reafforestation and training effort, the EEC extended funding for another year. Some 100 Honduran Miskitos and locally integrated refugees continued to maintain the plantations and research on soils, climate, flowering and fruition went on. Although the original beneficiaries of the project were no longer there, it was crucial to ensure that the remaining population would not go back to using the traditional slash-and-burn method of agriculture.

Two thousand hectares may seem very little when Central America is being deforested at the rate of 400,000 hectares a year, but the La Mosquitia project illustrates, in its own modest way, that the process of destruction can be reversed.

SYLVIE GIRARD

OPERATIONS

CAMBODIA: HOMEWARD BOUND

"The largest repatriation operation in history." "A brutal deadline." "UNHCR at the mercy of the Permanent Five." "Heading home to mines, malaria and water-borne disease."

The pundits had had their day. Now it was the turn of 43-year-old Tev Soeun. Surrounded by her four children, she sat beaming as a series of dignitaries praised her courage.

Tev Soeun, one of 370,000 Cambodians in exile along the Thai border, was going home. It was 30 March in Site 2 - the largest camp on the Thai border, and the birthplace of Tev's 3-year-old daughter, Prum Rany. Now it was the scene of an elaborate departure ceremony for the 527 refugees, including Tev Soeun, who would comprise the first convoy to return to Cambodia.

More than 330,000 Cambodians have registered for repatriation, but there is always something special about being first. Tev Soeun and her children boarded their bus at 6 a.m. The convoy trundled up to the field normally reserved for food distribution. After the dances, the interviews and the speeches, the 527 pioneers were blessed by a Buddhist monk. Then the convoy set out for the border crossing near Aranyaprathet, Thailand, escorted by UNHCR vehicles.

There was a short, dignified ceremony at the border crossing, as refugee leaders descended and walked across the small, crowded bridge at Poipet. They were greeted by Cam-

UNHCR M. Kobayashi

Malaysian Rangers attached to the peace-keeping force show UN determination to protect returnees

bodian officials and handed orchids. After eight years in exile, Tev Soeun was home.

Then it was back in the buses, for a 90-minute drive down the road to the Cambodian town of Sisophon. There was one significant difference. At the frontier, each bus had acquired two armed soldiers from the First Malaysian Ranger battalion, which is attached to the UN peace-keeping force in Cambodia. The guards sat cradling their guns - symbols of the insecurity in Cambodia, but also of the UN's determination to protect the returning refugees.

Optimism on the buses

Watching this day unfold, after so many weeks of planning and so many gloomy predictions, it was impossible not to feel euphoric. By April 22, eight convoys had returned carrying 3,398 Cambodians, and the procedure had become almost routine. There were no mishaps, with the exception of one broken-down bus and several cases of travel sickness.

The returnees themselves were back on Cambodian soil, at two of the six reception centers that UNHCR has constructed in Cambodia with the help of the non-governmental organizations CONCERN and Christian Outreach. By the end of the week, they were moving out to distribution points (usually pagodas) - transported by CARE. The final stage of the journey takes them from the distribution point to the resettlement sites, in communes which they themselves had chosen.

And it was not just UNHCR officials who felt elated. After 17 years of upheaval, war and exile, Cambodian refugees are not naturally prone to optimism, but there was no mistaking the excited mood on the convoys and in the reception centers.

Tev Soeun, for instance, should have been apprehensive. Her husband had deserted her for a younger woman in Site 2. Now she was coming home with children ranging in ages from 3 to 23. When she finally reaches the village where she will live, near Sisophon, she will receive a package of food for a year, a house frame, and agricultural tools worth $570, three times the annual income of the average Cambodian family. Still, it will not be easy for a single mother who has lived in a semi-urban camp for seven years to start from scratch.

Yet she seemed completely at ease, bubbling with enthusiasm at the prospect of linking up again with her mother who had stayed behind in Sisophon. "Besides which, my two daughters want to marry farmers."

Others on the first convoy were more circumspect. Some were downright worried. "I'm not terribly hopeful, I don't have great expectations," said 28-year-old Sean Eng, a single woman from the Site 8 camp. It is hardly surprising. Site 8, which is controlled by the Khmer Rouge faction, had been in the news recently

following a raid by bandits that left two dead. Faced by this kind of insecurity in the enclosed Site 8 camp in Thailand, and insecurity in her own country - where she would be free to move - Sean Eng chose home.

For some the journey home passed in a blur. Eight-year-old Savong, for instance, went back in a wheelchair, crippled by polio. She appeared bemused as the ceremony unfolded at Site 2, indifferent to the elegant coconut dance (performed by camp children her own age), to the blaring music and the colorful posters. But her mother was fiercely protective. If she went home, then Savong would go too.

As soon as 30 March was set for the first departure, UNHCR officials on both sides of the border quickly prepared a list of so-called "exceptionally vulnerable individuals" (EVIs). The UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) which has been absorbed by UNHCR, has registered almost 2,500 EVIs in the camps - ranging from paraplegics to asthmatics who present a special concern.

Seventy EVIs were provisionally scheduled to depart in April, but the list was reviewed and reduced to 27. Among those struck off were the chronically ill, those on medication, or those who would have gone back alone - i.e. without family support. Several elderly people were included, then taken off the list. Better to play safe, until it is known what they will face on return.

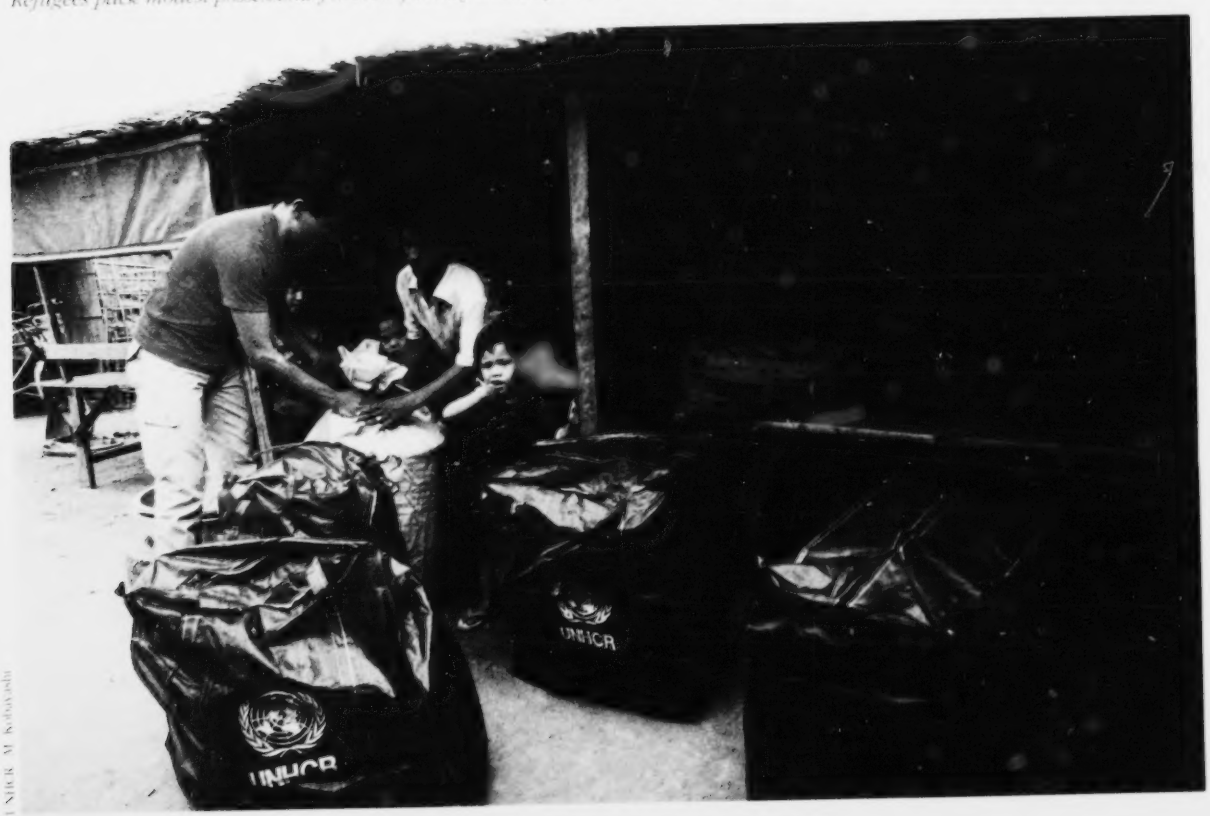
Anxieties remain

But what are Tev Soeun and the others returning to? The nagging question has been there ever since the end of February, when Sergio Vieira de Mello, the High Commissioner's Special Envoy for Cambodian repatriation, announced the 30 March departure date at a meeting of the Supreme National Council in Phnom Penh.

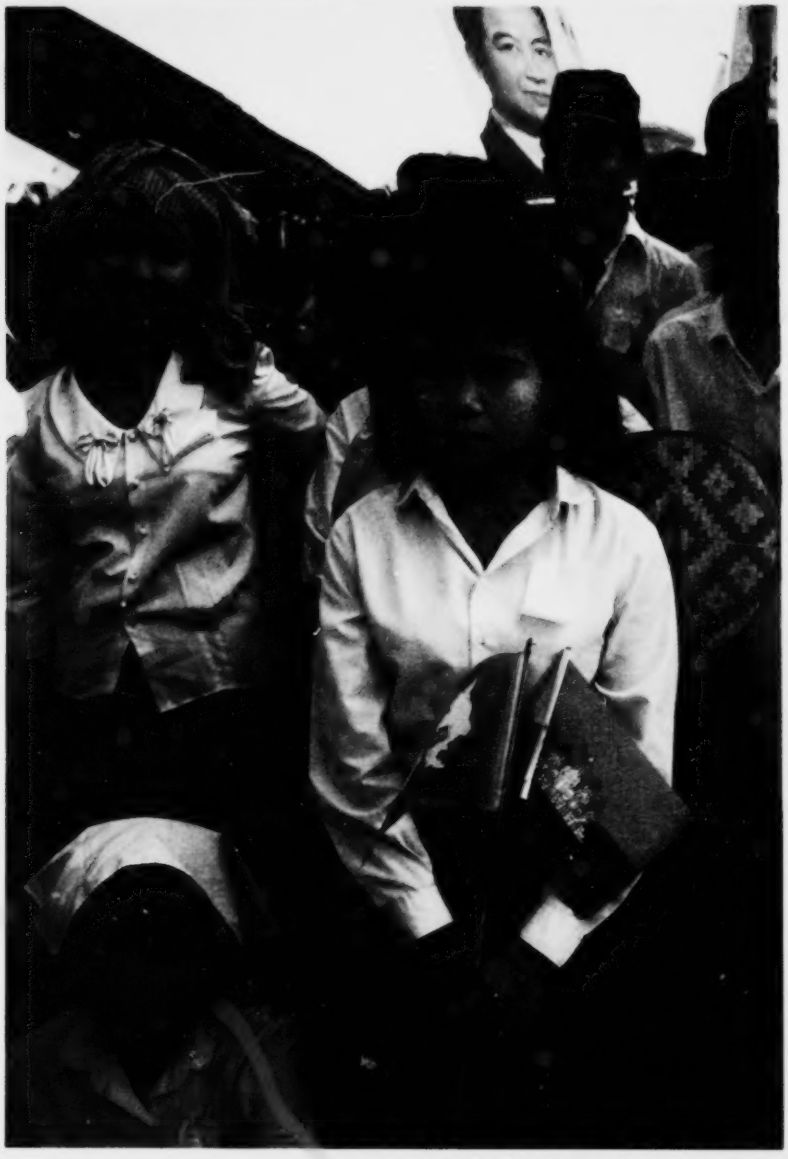
The Council was set up at the Paris Peace Conference to serve as an interim government while the United Nations steers Cambodia towards elections in 1993 and it offers Cambodia's four factions a chance to exchange views. On this occasion they didn't have a lot to say. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who chairs the SNC, was uneasy - and said he would not mind at all if the repatriation was postponed until the end of April.

"We would prefer to start sooner, Your Highness," answered Vieira de Mello. "Any delay would take us too close to the rainy season, when the roads become impassable. It would also be bad for morale. The refugees might take matters into their

Refugees pack modest possessions for their journey home after 17 years of war and exile



UNHCR/ M. Kobayashi



UNHCR M. Edwards

Schoolgirls welcome returning convoys: by the end of the first phase, the procedure had become routine

own hands and move back at the behest of one of the factions." Everyone knew what he meant. They had read the press reports of coercion in the camps.

The prince nodded, and agreed to preside over the arrival of the first convoy. It was decided that this news should not be leaked, otherwise there would be a stampede of refugees trying to get onto the first convoy. Two days later, the news was broadcast over the Voice of America. So much for secrecy.

Prince Sihanouk duly arrived by helicopter at the Sisophon reception center six weeks later to a riotous, frenetic ceremony.

Even so, there remain many unanswered questions. Is UNHCR ready? The answer should be obvious, after so many months of discussion. But each step of the repatriation plan - snaking from the camps in Thailand across the border and back into the villages of Cambodia, reveals how much needs to be firmly in place before the idea can take root in Cambodia's unpromising soil.

It starts in the camps. Here the Cambodians have to be told of the options - and neutral information is hard to convey in such a charged atmosphere as Site 2, or camps like O'Trao and Site 8. If the educated and skilled are allowed to leave first (and there are 25,000 Khmers employed by UNHCR/UNBRO) the camps could be deprived of their administrators, and degenerate into anarchy.

Then there are the EVIs, like Savong, the orphans, the paraplegics, the mentally ill, the aged widows. And what of the 77 prisoners who have been condemned to more than five years in jail in Site 2 by Khmer Justice Committees made up of fellow refugees? Will these sentences be reaffirmed by the new government of Cambodia?

But the border looks easy compared to the situation in Cambodia itself. The assumption has always been that land could be found for the returnees. This assumption has not been borne out, and this poses perhaps the biggest threat to the UNHCR plan.

Following the Paris peace accord, surveys were conducted in the border camps and refugees were asked where they wanted to live in Cambodia. Seventy-nine percent expressed a preference for the four western provinces of Battambang, Pursat, Siem Reap and Banteay Meanchey. In November 1991, results of satellite mapping and on-site verification by UNHCR technicians suggested that 231,000 hectares of potentially usable land was available. UNHCR matched these two sets of data and confidently predicted that each family

would receive two hectares.

Now, the picture looks very different. Much of the land that appeared on the satellite image has been found to be uninhabitable - either because it is flooded during the rainy season, or because it is mined, or because it is already occupied. "As security has improved, and the fighting has diminished, people are moving out and claiming unused land," said Daniel Mora Castro, a UNHCR water specialist.

Before land can be allocated to returnees, UNHCR has to bear five important criteria in mind: first, the preferred choice of the camp residents (down to the level of commune); second, the availability of land; third, the absence of mines; fourth, the presence of water; and finally, access to a road so that supplies can get through in the rains.

Applying these strict criteria, suitable land for just 5,719 families has been confirmed as immediately available - far short of the target of 19,000 that UNHCR had hoped to move in the first phase. UNHCR is now actively reviewing non-agricultural options for the returnees.

What matters is not the pace or the deadline, but the manner in which repatriation takes place. If the first movements are credible, and the returnees stay in their new homes, more will follow and the operation will gather momentum before the end of the year.

If, however, these first returns go awry and the settlers abandon their new homes, repatriation might be dealt a fatal blow.

No money worries

The total cost of repatriation to Cambodia is $116 million; of this, UNHCR will account for $84.3 million, and the World Food Program (WFP) $31.9 million. As of 6 April, UNHCR had received $54.76 million. This comes at a time when donors face competing claims from the arrival of thousands of desperate Burmese in Bangladesh and the huge peace-keeping force in Yugoslavia. It indicates not simply a desire to start rebuilding Cambodia, but confidence in UNHCR's repatriation plan.

With all the unforeseen problems, it sometimes seems as if that confidence is misplaced. But problems can also be solved. Two months ago, we were bemoaning the state of the roads - particularly the potholed, broken Route 5 from the frontier to Sisophon. Then Thai soldiers started removing mines and repairing the road. By mid-March they had found over 300 mines. The 30 March convoy of returnees and journalists sailed down the road without so much as a puncture.

What of mines? The question recurs repeatedly. Cambodia is littered with mines, ranging from the curved Soviet-made equivalent of the claymore (packed with metal slivers) to the small green "frogs" which can blow off a leg and are no bigger than a hockey puck. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, there are at least 36,000 amputees in Cambodia - the highest per capita ratio in the world.

Accidents have decreased in number since the ceasefire, but on a recent trip to the district hospital of Cralanh, in Siem Reap province, UNHCR field officer Marion Roche found a sharp increase - from two amputations in January, to 10 in February. Many of the victims had been wounded while collecting firewood, or trying to recover stray cows that had wandered into the forest.

In other words, while national statistics may show a downward trend, it is only too easy to stumble into local pockets of real horror. Worse, more mines are being laid than removed: soldiers routinely place mines around their outposts at night. Some farmers mine their paddy fields.

The gamble

Should UNHCR be bringing people back to such a country? Cambodians will be living with mines for years to come, and the refugees themselves do not view the mere presence of mines as an obstacle to repatriation. They will go home anyway. The challenge thus becomes to minimize the risk - and try to ensure that repatriation helps the returnees deal with the legacy of what Asia Watch has called "the coward's war."

UNHCR contracted a British charity HALO Trust to conduct a survey of the four western provinces. The results are not discouraging. Working off maps of minefields, and checking with locals, HALO teams have covered huge tracts of land, pinpointed hundreds of minefields, and concluded that 127,000 hectares of land are probably free from mines. This allowed UNHCR some breathing space. The first returnees would not be going back to dangerous areas.

But for the operation to achieve the pace intended it is crucial that UNTAC, the UN Transitional Authority, develop a speedy demining program.

It's a race against time - not just to ensure that the first sites are free from mines, but also that they have water, access to health centers, schools. Malaria is a particular threat. Cambodia's mosquitoes have developed strong resistance to modern drugs - but most of the border population has no resistance to malaria. UNHCR has decided to give each family a mosquito net impregnated with insecticide. Better still, it will try and ensure that resettlement sites are not located in hyperendemic areas, bordering the forests. Once again, as the numbers grow and the land options narrow, that may be easier said than done.

Andrew Thompson, a UNHCR consultant, points out that there are 65,000 children under five in the camps who have enjoyed clean, chlorinated water all their lives. In Cambodia, water-borne diseases are the number one killer of infants.

OXFAM and UNICEF are working on an emergency plan to provide clean water. This will probably include the digging of ponds to hold the rains. But pondwater will need purification kits. More expense, more organization. Herein lies a real dilemma: UNHCR cannot hold the returnees' hands, or treat them like a privileged minority in their own country. That will be resented by locals. Nor is it the road to self-sufficiency. On the other hand, UNHCR has a clear responsibility. How far does it extend?

Like so much else in this complex operation, the answer will probably emerge through trial and error.

And what of the future? What if there just isn't enough land available? UNHCR is actively considering non-agricultural alternatives. It is seeking land outside the four western provinces. It is trying to find opportunities for the teachers, doctors, mechanics, psychiatrists - for the huge pool of trained manpower in the camps, who can contribute so much to their shattered country. This, too, will require a change of thinking: hitherto, any return to the cities has been frowned upon. Now, it's viewed as realism.

And the outcome? We should start to know by the end of May, when the "mango rains" begin. The first movements home were the thin end of the wedge: if they work, the pace will accelerate, and the UN's ambitious plans for Cambodia will acquire substance. If they fail to take root, then not just repatriation, but reconstruction, could suffer an irreversible blow.

The stakes are so high, and Cambodia's past history so grim, that it's easy to be overawed. But these are people, not figures. Each family that returns, and remains, will be a minor triumph. Something to build on. Proof that Cambodia may at last be starting to escape its dreadful past.

IAIN GUEST

UNHCR / I. Guest

The UN Transitional Authority must develop a speedy demining program

OPERATIONS

KENYA: THE BIRTH OF A CRISIS

Combine civil warfare, drought and famine with bureaucratic inertia and you have the makings of a refugee crisis of daunting proportions.

Eighteen months ago, Kenya, traditionally a haven of relative prosperity and political stability in the conflict-ridden Horn of Africa, hosted 14,000 refugees in a tidy program with few problems. By July 1991, there were more than 40,000 refugees and by October the number had increased to 60,000. Today, Somalis and Ethiopians are pouring across the borders of this east African nation at the rate of up to 2,000 each day. Nearly 200,000 are already jammed into the camps and tens of thousands more are expected, including a possible influx from southern Sudan.

The camps are overcrowded, food and water are in short supply, insecurity is a serious concern. But until this year, the situation developed relatively slowly and there was plenty of early warning. Field workers are asking why UNHCR has been forced to move into emergency gear.

"It took time for the international community to acknowledge that a refugee emergency was brewing," said Carroll Faubert, UNHCR's Representative to Kenya. "UNHCR itself is not without blame as it did not have the capacity to speedily staff a crisis area."

"The number of refugees in the camps is nearly double what we had at the start of 1992," added Faubert. "Think of this in terms of UNHCR having to establish three totally new towns, each accommodating 30,000 people, in a very short period and in a drought-stricken region. There are

UNHCR J. Sprenkler

Inadequate water supply in Liboi has prompted long queues of jerrycans

horrendous problems of food, water, health and sanitation. Coupled with this, the majority of the population of our camps arrive in a state of shock, suffering from malnutrition and numerous ailments."

The nightmare

The Somalis arrive at the rate of more than 400 a day, fleeing a vicious civil war that has killed an estimated 14,000 people and left 27,000 wounded since November.

One typical day of new arrivals includes a mercy boat carrying 280 starving Somalis, most women in appalling condition. One woman was badly burned by a bomb. Another, in tears, was bleeding from a miscarriage caused by soldiers who beat and kicked her demanding gold.

"For many, relief comes too late. Refugees are arriving with bullet wounds that have gone unattended for quite some time," said Claude de Touillon, a UNHCR doctor in Kenya.

Within a week of taking up his new post in mid-April, Faubert inspected the three largest camps in Kenya - Ifo, Liboi and Walda. He called the death rate among new arrivals "disastrous."

"We had 485 deaths in Ifo in March," said Faubert. "That's a death rate of 7.4 per 10,000 persons a day. Anything over two deaths per 10,000 a day is considered alarming."

Health and sanitation were the most serious problems at Ifo. The Kenyan Ministry of Health and UNHCR immediately instituted a crash program to eliminate health hazards, including the carcasses of scores of dead animals killed by drought, in the camp of 30,000 people.

A task force made up of 80 UNHCR staff members, teams from relief agencies involved in the operation and 31 student volunteers from Nairobi University descended on Ifo.

"People are dying of respiratory infections, malnutrition and diarrhea," said Faubert. "We have decent hospitals and excellent medical support and many of these people could be saved. One problem is nomadic Somalis do not go to hospitals when they fall sick. They stay in their tents or they go to a local healer. Just before they die, they come to the hospital - too late.

"But UNHCR should know about the culture of Somalis, we've been dealing with them for 15 years," Faubert added. Every UNHCR vehicle in Ifo is now being used to scour the camp for the sick and malnourished and ferry them to the hospital and feeding centers.

In the heat of Liboi

Liboi is all that a refugee camp should not be. Situated in a semi-desert area near the Somali border, water is scarce and security precarious.

Meant as a transit camp for not more than 3,000 refugees, Liboi is now packed with 68,000 Somalis.

"Life is very difficult in Liboi. We haven't enough water. We haven't enough peace," said 19-year-old Annifah whose family was scattered all over Somalia by the war.

Until new boreholes were dug this year, people queued for up to 48 hours, under an unbearable sun, for only three liters of water. Refugees are now getting at least 10 liters of water a day but it is not enough.

And the security picture is still ominous. "There is hooliganism at night. People have guns. They are coming into our shelter and taking all that we've got. They are raping the girls who go to fetch firewood. Last week, they killed my older brother," said Neimah, a pretty 20-year-old.

Special security measures are being taken: refugees are disarmed before entering the camps and, at the

Ethiopian refugees are arriving in Walda in appalling condition

UNHCR Photo

request of the refugees themselves, searches for hidden arms are being conducted, shelter by shelter.

"There are also the classic problems of feeding - double registration and falsification of documents by dishonest refugees whose greed works to the detriment of the needy majority," said Faubert.

And in Walda ...

North, along the Ethiopian border, the scenario is just as depressing. Until mid-April when the influx was slowed by rains, Ethiopian refugees were pouring into Kenya at the rate of 1,500 a day. Many are little more than skin and bones when they reach Walda camp.

Some have trekked more than 600 kilometers to reach the border - without food or water for five days or more. Many have gunshot wounds and others are so exhausted that they collapse within sight of the frontier. UNHCR has 21 trucks patrolling the border areas looking for those in need.

"They are so weak that they cannot even hold the milk box we give them upon their arrival," said Lamine Kamara, a UNHCR field officer in Walda.

Parts of southern Ethiopia are severely affected by drought, famine, banditry and inter-ethnic clashes. UNHCR estimates that at least 300,000 people are in dire need of assistance.

But, because of rampant insecurity, food distribution has practically ground to a halt in the area. And so, they flee south.

Within a matter of weeks Walda's population jumped from 6,000 Ethiopian refugees to 30,000.

"We are still expecting more," said a local Kenyan official. "They are in the bush on their way to Kenya. They are coming from all over southern Ethiopia."

The new arrivals are mostly women, some with emaciated babies on the verge of death, children under five and the elderly. The men stay behind ... to fight.

Walda is in the middle of nowhere, 75 kilometers from the Ethiopian border. The nearest village, Sololo, is 30 kilometers away and takes six hours to reach during the rainy season.

Water, shelter and food are of major concern. Security is tenuous. Food convoys, a major temptation for starving people, come under regular attack.

Nationals, who have little to eat and inadequate water, are tempted to slip into the camp posing as refugees. The High Commissioner insists that their needs must also be addressed.

"Our work in the camps cannot be seen in isolation from the prevailing conditions of the surrounding population," said Faubert.

Conservative estimates say the refugee population in Kenya will have reached 340,000 by the end of June.

CHRISTIANE BERTHIAUME

OPERATIONS

BANGLADESH: IN THE EYE OF A STORM

It is cyclone season in Bangladesh. For the 225,000 Myanmar refugees it hosts, the arrival of the storms and the ensuing monsoon rains can only mean more misery.

Only 57 percent of the refugees are under shelter in the camps and Bangladesh authorities are racing against time to find cover for the rest living under makeshift sheds of leaves and twigs.

Conditions in the congested camps are serious. Water and sanitation facilities are often inadequate. There is evidence of measles in the camps, located in a region where the incidence of malaria is the highest in the country.

"I don't even want to imagine what will happen when the rains come," said Dr. Mohamad Shaahjahan, head of the local NGO Gonoshastra Kendra. "The situation now can be described at best as risky. The potential for disaster is there."

Unless urgent measures are taken, Shaahjahan expects the incidence of dysentery, diarrhea and respiratory diseases to increase because of malnutrition and sanitation problems.

The loosely bound galvanized iron roofs used in the newly built camps could easily be blown away, becoming deadly projectiles, when the storms hit.

At the back of everyone's mind is the specter of 1978, when more than 220,000 Myanmar refugees flooded into Bangladesh, one of the

Many of the refugees are women whose husbands are missing

world's poorest countries. Some 10,000 of them, mostly children, died over a six-month period after food distribution problems caused famine-like conditions.

While the situation now is serious, the combined efforts of government, UNHCR and NGOs are steadily yielding results. More shelters are being constructed. Two new camp sites are being cleared to accommodate 50,000 people. Water is being trucked to the southern camps. Workers are sinking tube wells and digging latrines. A vaccination campaign is underway.

The current influx into Bangladesh began in early 1991 and reached dramatic proportions in December when ancient rowboats came in droves on the Bangladesh side of the river Naf, disgorging refugees, mostly women and children, at the rate of up to 6,000 per day.

The refugees said the government of Myanmar, a largely Buddhist country, has mounted a campaign of persecution against the Rohingya Moslem population in Arakan province, triggering one of the world's most serious refugee crises. Most of the complaints centered on Myanmar's alleged forced labor policy.

Stepping out of a rundown fishing boat at Teknaf Upazilla on a recent Saturday afternoon, Roshid Ahmad looked back to the Arakan hills that were his home only 30 minutes ago and his eyes misted.

"The soldiers are forcing people to work in the construction of a road. There is no pay. No rice," said the 25-year-old Ahmad, a former student at the Islamic institute in the Arakan capital Akyab. All he had on his arrival were the sequined green gown he wore over white pants.

Women in the encampments outside the Bangladesh resort district of Cox's Bazar bitterly recounted stories of murder and the rape they experienced in Myanmar. They said there was a systematic campaign to force the Rohingyas out of the country.

But the Myanmar government has denied such allegations and says the refugees were illegal migrants it will not take back.

"This is a terrible tragedy and a disturbing development," said Jamshid Anvar, UNHCR's regional director for Asia and Oceania, during a visit to the refugee camps in March.

"The refugees are not pouring into Bangladesh due to fear of persecution, but only after being persecuted," he said. "The world will be in a chaotic situation if all countries start expelling minorities who have lived there for generations."

The Rohingyas comprise 1.6 million of the 2.2 million population of Arakan. Once an independent kingdom, Arakan was founded by Arab and Moorish merchants who spread Islam in the 7th century during stops in their trading forays into China. A mountain spine separates Arakan from the Myanmar heartland and the emotional mix of religious and geographic issues has turned the area into a periodic cauldron of ethnic violence.

In fact, demands for self-rule among Burma's 12 major tribes have sparked uprisings since independence from Britain in 1948. In the eastern section of the country bordering Thailand, a full-blown war is raging between Myanmar troops and guerrillas of the Christian-dominated Karen tribe. Some 70,000 Karens have fled into Thailand.

The Bangladesh government has coped creditably well with the refugee influx despite its limited resources. It is no stranger to emergencies, having had to deal with the seasonal devastating storms from the Bay of Bengal. The area where the refugees have converged has barely recovered from a monstrous cyclone that left more than 100,000 people dead a year ago.

At the outset, Bangladesh attempted to deal on its own with the refugee exodus, hoping to negotiate a political solution with Myanmar. But as the number of refugees increased, the government requested international assistance and accepted UNHCR's repeated offers of help.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata dispatched a technical mission to Bangladesh to assess the needs of the refugees and released $6 million from her emergency fund to purchase badly needed relief supplies. UNHCR airlifted some 3,000 rolls of plastic sheeting, 50,000 blankets, 10 Rubbhall warehouses and 10 modular hospital tents to the area. A UNHCR appeal went out to donors for $27.5 million.

The Bangladesh government supplied immediate food needs, which were distributed by the local Red Crescent Society. Supplementary feeding programs were launched by *Médecins sans frontières* and Save the Children Fund. The World Food Program initially provided $2 million worth of food. WHO, UNICEF, OXFAM and Islamic relief organizations helped in meeting sanitation and water problems.

After a visit in March to the camps, Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia said her government was determined to find a peaceful solution to the refugee crisis "at the earliest" time possible. "We will seek international support to pressure the Myanmar authorities for the early repatriation of the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh," she said.

Jafar Ahamed, 32, who once taught physics at a state high school in Myanmar, said the refugees are willing to go back to their homes provided their security and dignity are safeguarded.

"We don't want to be a permanent burden to the people of Bangladesh," Ahamed said.

FERNANDO DEL MUNDO

At one point, the fishing boats were ferrying as many as 6,000 refugees a day

UNHCR / del Mundo

OPERATIONS

YUGOSLAVIA: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

For some one million people displaced by the Yugoslav conflict and some 200,000 others outside the region waiting for calm, the future holds unanswered questions.

Biljana Miota cradles her daughter in the small Belgrade apartment that has been her home since she fled Vukovar.

"Could I go back?" Miota wondered. "I don't know what to answer, everything is broken."

Vukovar and the home where she had hoped to raise her children are in ruins. But that is not the worst of her problems. Her husband has been missing for months, a victim of a war that has taken the lives of some 10,000 people.

Many of the victims are civilians - women, children and the elderly - who once lived in harmony with their neighbors.

However, ethnic tension and economic collapse have brought hardship to all the 23.5 million people in the six republics that formed Yugoslavia. The inflation rate in March was 41 percent and some communities are experiencing a 75 percent unemployment rate.

But for those who lost their homes, their communities and their loved ones, it is clear that the war will exact its cost for years to come.

"When political parties started the conflict began," Miota said. "Everything was okay before; people weren't interested in politics."

Tranquility is long gone. Frontiers, both physical and emotional, now divide families. Miota's father-in-law, who fled to Croatia, cannot communicate with the family of his lost son.

UNHCR has delivered food rations to over 230,000 displaced families with the help of local Red Cross societies and distributed medical supplies through groups like *Médecins sans frontières*-Holland.

UNHCR/P. Pantuliano

As host family hospitality is stretched to the limit, many seek refuge in hostels, hotels and gymnasiums.

Other organizations, like the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF and the World Health Organization have also lent their expertise to the operation.

With fighting still on-going, UNHCR is preparing for perhaps the most challenging operation in its history, helping people home while trying to soothe the pain of fierce ethnic hatred.

"UNHCR's job is to ensure possibilities of return for displaced persons," said Lars Nielsen, field coordinator in UNHCR's Sarajevo office.

While the UN's blue helmets will keep peace in the three UN Protected Areas (UNPAs) and UN police and peace-keeping monitors will be present in other regions, the job of assisting and protecting the displaced belongs to UNHCR.

But insecurity runs high. Some 50 percent of the displaced people come from areas outside the UNPAs: they worry they may not be protected.

"We want to return and rebuild," said Vesna Knezevic, "but only in peace."

Knezevic, speaking at a hostel where she has lived for months, is ready to return to the farm she and her husband built, with one condition, "I want safety, and safety for my children."

Securing the safe return and reintegration of people forced from their homes while tension remains high will be a difficult challenge, according to Jose-Maria Mendiluce, the special envoy coordinating UNHCR's work in the region.

"This will be 90 percent a protection operation," Mendiluce said.

The job facing UNHCR is to assure those who want to return that their reintegration will be monitored and that revenge will not be meted out on those willing to mend fences.

Because of the sheer number of displaced and the lack of housing due to the destruction, going home for many means returning to rubble. In some areas, empty homes have been appropriated by newcomers, forced to flee their own communities. Getting local authorities to agree to accept returnees and new inhabitants to return to their own communities will be tough.

Talking with people is UNHCR's chief tactic: "We have to explore and promote any type of meeting between authorities as well as with groups of displaced and local officials," Mendiluce explained.

UNHCR staff fan out from offices throughout the region to meet the displaced and the gun-toting men now administering communities where local police are hard to find.

"We are in the field to visit them and give them back their self-confidence," said Nielsen.

But sporadic fighting continues, and UNHCR's work is hampered by a lack of funding and threats that returnees will be treated as war criminals.

"The operation could go in any direction," said Jean-Claude Concolato, head of UNHCR's Zagreb office. "But humanitarian organizations like UNHCR can give a definite push towards peace. The truth is that we are here during an instance of freedom, a window of opportunity."

Already UNHCR, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Hungary have signed agreements on the right of displaced people and refugees to return. Talks also have been held with officials in Belgrade.

The crux of the problem remains getting the angry and well-armed local leaders to accept the return of former residents.

People on the ground see the work of UNHCR and the blue helmets as the sole chance to restore peace and avoid all-out war.

"The UN is the only hope," said a Red Cross official in Doboj. "But you can't make any mistakes or it's all over."

PETER KESSLER

OPERATIONS

SOUTH AFRICA: FACING REALITY

UNHCR, the first United Nations body to establish a presence in South Africa for more than 30 years, has endured a fair share of confusion after overcoming outright hostility from several quarters in its operation to bring back refugees and political exiles.

Conservatives in South Africa have condemned UNHCR's presence, describing the U.N. as a "cancer" and a "viper in South Africa's bosom." The U.N. has been accused in the right-wing press of "squandering billions of dollars and undermining the taxpayers who supply them."

Undaunted, UNHCR moved ahead with its voluntary repatriation program, budgeting nearly $29 million to cover 30,000 returnees.

This figure was based mainly on estimates supplied by the main opposition political groups in South Africa, notably the African National Congress (ANC), many of whose members had fled the country over the past 25 years.

Exiles were reportedly living in many African countries, Australia, the United States, Canada, Cuba and several European nations. But once registration started at UNHCR offices, it became apparent the flow of refugees seeking voluntary repatriation would be a trickle rather than a torrent.

Several factors were involved. It appeared that the original estimate of the number of exiles was too high and that many of them were in no hurry to return, having secured employment and homes abroad, two items which are in short supply in South Africa.

As a consequence, UNHCR revised its figures for those seeking international transport and adjusted the total of those needing material assistance to 12,850. By March, it appeared the final number would be between 13,000 and 15,000. It proposed an increase in the reintegration package with the result that the overall budget was reduced to $26,698,729 - a per capita repatriation cost of $2,078.

European Community nations and 12 other countries actually contributed more than the revised budget and donor endorsement was sought for the new program which would utilize most of the available funds.

UNHCR/J. Adam

Most returnees are of urban origin and their future is clouded with uncertainty

Given the slow rate of registration, it also became clear that the time frame for the program would have to be extended from April to the end of September 1992.

Some 7,000 exiles had returned to South Africa prior to the first UNHCR-organized flight on 11 December 1991. The early returnees, almost all members of the ANC, had been promised a "resettlement allowance" by the ANC of $794.

Under the UNHCR program, cash payments totalling $1,518 are made to each adult returnee, spread over a six-month period, with lesser amounts for children.

Many of the early returnees complained they had received nothing and the ANC stated in February that it had no funds to give to returnees. UNHCR, however, undertook to give allowances to all returnees, irrespective of whether they were repatriated by the ANC or UNHCR, or whether they were affiliated to any political organization.

UNHCR's implementing partner in the reintegration process is the National Coordinating Committee for the Repatriation of South African Exiles (NCCR) - composed of political movements such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), religious bodies and professional organizations representing medical, legal and social workers. As a new organization, the NCCR had to create accounting and financial control systems and UNHCR experts needed time to train NCCR staff in the needs of financial management, book-keeping and accounting.

The South African operation has been unique in that, unlike other programs in Africa, the overwhelming number of returnees are of urban origin. Thus they are returning to cities and towns in a country where unemployment stands at around 40 percent. The few repatriants seeking to return to farming face a scarcity of land and the worst drought for three decades, which has crippled South Africa's 1992 grain harvest.

Another major factor affecting many of the returnees is that because they have been in exile for 15-20 years, they have lost contact with South Africa. Many of the returnees have obtained their educational and vocational training in developing countries or East European nations and their qualifications often are not readily recognized by prospective employers in South Africa. They also find themselves competing in a labor market awash with unemployed, but more skilled or locally trained, South Africans.

These problems are known to have deterred many exiles who have secured employment overseas since fleeing South Africa. Returnees have also had to cope with rampant inflation, running at more than 15 percent annually and increasing crime and violence throughout the country. Political uncertainty remains despite the abolition of apartheid. Violent clashes between rival black parties have marred the reform process, despite the success of President F.W. de Klerk in trouncing die-hard white conservatives at the polls. A referendum, probably the last confined to the present all-white electorate, voted nearly 70 percent in favor of the government's plans to bring in a new constitution allowing for majority rule through negotiation.

Against this backdrop, many South Africans posed the question "Why bring these people back? Why do they want to come back?"

UNHCR pointed out that "these people" volunteered to return. Perhaps the words of one returnee that "it's a truly wonderful feeling to be home" offer the simple explanation of why refugees wish to end their exile.

Once home, most returnees press on with the task of making a new life in their homeland.

Jabu Mosima, 22, came back from Tanzania in January with no trade or professional qualifications. He is now in a three-month course on basic catering arranged by the NCCR which has also placed other returnees

in training programs including carpentry, plumbing, auto mechanics and small business management.

"I'm happy to be learning something," Mosima said. "I'm hopeful that when I finish the course I'll get a job...someone must be interested in employing me."

Another returnee, Oupa Banda, 57, came back after nearly 20 years in exile accompanied by his wife and seven children. He had worked as an air conditioning and refrigeration mechanic in Tanzania, but has been in poor health since his return on 6 March.

"I need a house and a pension to fend for my family," he said from his temporary home at the Sebokeng reception center, near Johannesburg.

NCCR counselling officers were helping Banda along with others having difficulty finding their feet back in South Africa.

NCCR's Officer for Liaison and Training, Archie Abrahams, is cautiously optimistic: "Of course there is no guarantee that people will find employment after their training," he warned. "Returnees may have gone to school, but very few have marketable skills, let alone work experience."

For this reason, Abrahams said the NCCR was looking to place returnees more in the "informal" sector of the community - small scale businesses and projects.

By late April, more than 3,100 of the 7,170 people who had filled out UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Application Form (VRAF) had been returned home - most of them by air from Tanzania. These charter flights, booked by UNHCR's other main implementing partner, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), often landed two to five hours behind schedule and invariably carried fewer returnees than originally manifested. This was attributed to would-be repatriants simply not arriving at their point of departure, having decided the date was not suitable or because of ill-health.

The government rejected the VRAFs of only four people and later reversed its decision on one of these. The three others faced charges of murder or attempted murder if they returned to South Africa. The government allowed them to appeal to the State President to rescind the charges, and UNHCR legal officers took up their case.

Generally, South African airport officials, UNHCR and NCCR staff have cooperated well to clear the returnees through immigration and customs formalities. There were incidents, such as an X-Ray machine showing in one returnee's luggage a long-bladed hunting knife, which was confiscated, and one plane arriving in East London without most of the luggage of the 91 returnees aboard - it had been left behind in Dar-es-Salaam.

Legal officers of UNHCR's protection unit have investigated several reports of police harassment of returnees. The most notable case concerned the arrest of three men who were cleared by the authorities to return from exile in Botswana. Police arrested them and one was held for two weeks before he was allowed bail on charges involving the alleged beating of a policeman and the theft of his firearm. The incident allegedly occurred prior to the persons concerned leaving the country. After UNHCR representations, all charges against the men were dropped. A fourth returnee, also allegedly involved in the incident, was later arrested but released without any charges being laid against him.

Another case involved a returnee said to have been involved in a shootout with police in which a police officer was fatally wounded. The returnee himself was wounded but was later released on bail after UNHCR and NCCR intervention.

Despite the smaller-than-anticipated number of refugees returning to South Africa, and problems encountered during the program, the operation can be regarded as a success.

With the necessary funds available, UNHCR and its implementing partners have been able to provide maximum support to returnees and assist them to reintegrate into a society beset with a variety of problems.

For the first time, a United Nations body is in constant contact with South African authorities on assisting returnees, and for UNHCR the operation is especially crucial. There are more than 100,000 refugees from the civil conflict in Mozambique known to be living in camps in South Africa. With the goodwill of the South African Government, the UNHCR mandate will be extended to provide the necessary aid to these refugees.

MICHAEL KEATS

Unemployment, inflation and a housing shortage confront returnees

SAFE COUNTRY? SAYS WHO?

The struggle to deal with increasing numbers of asylum seekers, all of whom seem to have a valid claim to individual case-by-case determination, continues to produce a flurry of desperate measures. One of the latest is the emerging practice, not yet a concept, of listing so-called safe countries. Nationals of such safe countries will be presumed, without more ado, not to qualify as refugees under the Convention, no matter what their individual attributes or the facts of their claim.

Switzerland, closely followed by Belgium, was among the first to name 'safe countries.' Among the countries of origin on the 'safe' list were Algeria (since removed), Angola, Bulgaria, Hungary, India, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

For administrators, it's an attractive approach, likely to reduce numbers at a stroke, particularly if the country labelled 'safe' is a major producer of asylum seekers. What is more, so the argument goes, additional dollars can be freed up for the 'real' refugees, and for closer attention to the difficult cases.

But for refugee protection and human rights advocates, the medicine is hard to swallow. How many listed countries have a clean bill of health? In how many are the standards of judicial protection sufficiently well established?

First principles tell us that every case needs consideration on its particular facts. How can we be sufficiently sure that even the most respectable and reputable of regimes has not, just this once, produced a refugee? None of our societies is that pure, we say, and a sneaking distrust of even our closest neighbors prods us to insist on inquiry in even the remotest claim.

International airports are temporary homes for hundreds of asylum seekers

UNHCR A. Hollmann

Much of this, of course, reflects our highly individualized sense of human rights: human rights exist to protect individuals, to be claimed by individuals. As everyone has the right not to be tortured, so everyone has the right to a hearing, to a remedy.

But do they? In all circumstances? Always? If this is beginning to sound like heresy, bear with me for a moment.

The right to a remedy is to a remedy for a violation of human rights. How is the existence of a violation to be determined, but on the evidence, on the facts, and according to a particular standard of proof.

And the standard? Yes, that is the question.

In refugee protection, what counts is risk. Is there a serious risk of the claimant facing persecution if returned to his or her country? But the existence of that risk is not only to be determined in a full due process hearing; for risk can be established and refuted by other means.

Who then is to say that countries are safe? And by whose standards? Secret men in secret rooms reading secret memos? No.

International standards can and should govern the process. Just as in refugee determination proper, the core issue is country information; and the key element in moving to rational and defensible assessments of risk will be the standard for collecting and verifying that information.

After all, there's no lack of information. The media report from mostly everywhere. Non-governmental organizations, like Amnesty International and the regional Watch Committees actively monitor what goes on; the United Nations has its working groups and rapporteurs; even governments are doing their homework.

But let's face it, there's a problem with verified information: it constrains options and it cuts both ways. Just as it may seem to tell us that there is no risk, in other cases it only confirms the opposite. The indisputable reverse of the safe country coin, is that there are unsafe countries. Citizens of such unsafe countries would then logically be entitled to protection unless the receiving government proves the contrary.

Now that, whether States realize it or not, also surely has its advantages, avoiding the necessity for case-by-case review and clearing the way for protection. And the urgent necessity for protection does not compel the single solution of granting full refugee status, but leaves open a range of responses including temporary refuge with the possibility of periodic review. Such an approach would give time for the development of multilateral initiatives on the causes of displacement.

Whether the objective is to include or to exclude, the essentials of risk assessment remain the same. What counts in every case is the weight of the information. Provided it is available, verified and public, a coherent body of country of origin information will necessarily gain authority.

According protection on that basis alone is hardly controversial. Denying protection is another matter, however, and the minimum price for dispensing with case-by-case review must surely include some mechanism for international or regional monitoring.

Human rights and the principles of refugee protection tell us that assessments of risk must be made - whether of torture, cruel or degrading treatment, persecution or other relevant harm. This process of assessment, however, has only just recently looked beyond civil and political rights to succeeding generations of rights, such as those of women and children.

Within this wider landscape, there is a need for us to broaden our horizons on case-by-case review through a cooperative assessment of risk based on reputable country-of-origin information and human rights principles. This in turn demands that we adopt and strengthen the standards of fact-finding developed by non-governmental organizations and the United Nations; that we give meaning to the criteria for verification, while keeping the humanitarian objective in view. And it requires that we use in good faith the information resources which modern technology brings us from the front line and the grass roots.

There is no room here, and no need, for 'confidential information', whose seductiveness owes more to some male thing about secret societies, than to any concern with accuracy. On the contrary, what is required is openness in assessment and transparency in gathering the facts relating to the causes of movement and conditions in countries of origin.

Both the effectiveness and the credibility of an information-based response will likely depend upon a concerted multilateral, regional or similar response, that includes States and international and non-governmental organizations. Ideally, it also should be moderated internationally, for example, by UNHCR or other human rights machinery, on the basis of agreed standards. Only in this way, will generalized judgments as to the safe and the unsafe acquire weight.

What is finally required, of course, is a total approach, which uses knowledge as the medium, linking movement to solutions through protection. But that is another story.

GUY S. GOODWIN-GILL
Editor-in-Chief
International Journal of Refugee Law

The indisputable reverse of the safe country coin, is that there are unsafe countries. Citizens of such unsafe countries would then logically be entitled to protection unless the receiving government proves the contrary.

WOMEN SPEAK OUT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Salvadorian women found they had little choice at the La Virtud refugee camp in Honduras. They either gave their bodies to local soldiers or went hungry.

"Being a woman, alone, with three children, I never thought anyone would help me," said Soledad, a Salvadorian refugee and one of 23 women who shared their experiences at a recent conference on uprooted women in Central America. Blanca, another Salvadorian who was repeatedly raped in the camp, explained, "I accepted the abuse because I thought it was the only way to get food."

Soledad and Blanca fled their war-torn country in 1983. Like the other refugee women who participated in the conference, they said the safety they sought in refugee camps proved elusive. Instead, they faced increased domestic violence, rape, and widespread sexual discrimination.

The vast majority of the 2 million Central Americans who sought sanctuary outside their homelands in the last decade were women. Women account for more than 60 percent of the 58,479 refugees in the region today.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sponsored the meeting - "A Gender Approach in the Work with Refugee, Returnee and Displaced Women: FOREFEM" to identify and seek solutions to the particular problems faced by uprooted women in Central America.

UNHCR realized that its numerous policy resolutions made during the 1980s to improve conditions for refugee women were having little impact. "The staff in Costa Rica was forced to recognize that these poli-

Guatemalan refugees: the safety they sought proved elusive

UNHCR R. Vogel

UNHCR/D. Bergund

Salvadorian returnees: the women want to be consulted

cies weren't bringing about the desired results," said Ana Liria Franch, UNHCR's Deputy Regional Representative for Central America. "That is how FOREFEM came about."

The conference, organized under the umbrella of the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA), brought together senior government officials, legal experts, human rights advocates and development experts as well as refugee women.

The refugees outlined three main areas that needed improvement: physical protection, access to development funds and consultation on repatriation operations.

The women all complained about inadequate protection from physical abuse. One woman, Candelaria, described being raped in the Mesa Grande camp in Honduras in 1983. She and other women from the camp complained to a UNHCR officer. He dismissed them, saying, "Those are women's problems."

Refugee women say they also face increased domestic violence in the camps. Relief workers point out that while women continue to cook, clean and raise children in the camps, the men are often left with little to do. Stripped of their jobs and traditional roles as providers, the men often take their frustrations out on their wives and children.

The conference recommended several ways to reduce the physical abuse of women. First, female protection officers should be present at reception posts and in camps. Second, women should be included on management committees in the camp. The conference also found that personal and family documentation would help guarantee more respect for individual women.

The refugee women said their plight could be much improved if they had equal access to development funds. Soledad, a Salvadorian refugee in Honduras, worked in an agricultural cooperative, tilling the soil all day. She persuaded a group of women to open a small pig farm with her. The business flourished and the refugee men demanded a share of the profits. Despite the women's pleas, Soledad said the UNHCR camp official ruled in favor of the men. The women were forced to sell their pigs. Refugee women said they want to participate in development projects other than the traditional ones of sewing and baking.

The conference urged governments and international organizations to promote self-sufficiency projects for women. It also called for equal treatment of women in the development process in order to prevent refugee movements and to assist returnee communities.

The refugee women criticized UNHCR for failing to consult with them about repatriation programs. They said women often succumbed unwillingly to group pressure, exerted by the men, to return to their countries. They complained that UNHCR usually gave the whole repatriation grant to the men. Often, they said, the men drank or gambled away all the money. The women said UNHCR should first ask them if they wanted to repatriate, and if they did, make sure each woman got her own grant.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata said in a statement read to the FOREFEM conference that the "refugee problem has a female face." The four-day meeting revealed how grim that face can be. But, it also offered practical solutions to some of the most serious problems confronting refugee women.

Since 1985, UNHCR's Executive Committee has tried to address the special needs of women in refugee camps around the world through a series of recommendations. In 1990, it approved the Policy on Refugee Women and in 1991, it adopted the Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women. The FOREFEM conference demonstrated that these policies and guidelines must now be enforced.

KYRA NUÑEZ

The International Rescue Committee topped ***Money Magazine's*** *honor roll of the 10 best managed US charities.*

IRC: A NO FRILLS NGO

In 1933, just weeks after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, Albert Einstein called for the creation of a volunteer committee of scholars, intellectuals, teachers and education leaders to "rescue" their comrades in Germany and Austria - particularly those who were Jewish. Einstein knew instinctively that their careers, and indeed their lives, were in danger.

Thus was born the International Rescue Committee. It had no office, no staff, no administration - only the energy, commitment and dedication of its members to be of help "to rescue."

After the fall of France in 1940, a band of young men and women established an operations center in a small hotel room in Marseille. For the cost of renting the room, and most likely a bit of protection money as "overhead," this group, called the Emergency Rescue Committee, proceeded to "rescue" 2,500 of Europe's leading intellectuals, by smuggling them clandestinely over the Pyrénées to Spain and Portugal. Again, no administration, only direct assistance to those in greatest need.

One of the young men operating out of that small room in the Hotel Splendide was Carel Sternberg, a law student from Prague, who had fled the advancing German army by riding his bicycle from Paris to Marseille. Among his assignments was to act as a courier. Armed with a 500 franc note, he would ride to a camp on the outskirts of Marseille, sneak in and find a specific refugee family,

give them the 500 franc note and then slip away. With the money, the refugee family was able to leave the camp as "self-sufficient" refugees. Once outside, Sternberg would reappear, direct the refugees towards their next destination where false passports and train tickets to the Pyrenees were waiting, and ride off on his bicycle to his next assignment.

Sternberg was to come to the United States himself in 1941, as a refugee, and began a lifetime of service with the International Rescue Committee, the last 20 years as its Executive Director. He never forgot the austerity and frugality of the Hotel Splendide operation. In fact, he ran the IRC very much in that mode – a lean, no frills, refugee-oriented program. A minimalist office evolved – with donated or second-hand furniture, manual typewriters, no carpeting and little or no administrative overhead.

Year after year, the IRC embraced an ethos that was consciously unbureaucratic, decentralized and pragmatic.

From a budget of $3 million in 1975, with 10 offices in the U.S., Europe and Asia, the IRC today has an annual budget of over $40 million, with 29 programs around the world. These programs are administered from the same headquarters IRC has occupied for over 20 years, with a senior management team consisting of an Executive Director and four Deputy Directors – for Overseas Operations, Domestic Resettlement, Development and Finance. There is even room in the office for volunteers – including a desk for the now "retired" Carel Sternberg, who is a full-time volunteer case worker.

The office is, alas, now carpeted. The old linoleum squares which wore out are made no longer. There are electric typewriters, and computers have been seen on occasion – but almost all the furniture is still donated. In a sense, the spirit Carel Sternberg brought with him from the Hotel Splendide over 50 years ago still permeates the IRC and its "style" of operations.

People selected for overseas assignments are offered, at best, one to two-year contracts. The selection of staff for overseas operations is a critical function, in large part because of IRC's management style of decentralization. The field staff is encouraged to take initiatives in program development. The role of headquarters is more to support the field than to direct or "micromanage" it. Here again, headquarter's costs are kept to the minimum, permitting the greatest amount possible of funds raised to be applied directly to programs.

Decentralization and reliance on staff initiative result in an extraordinary self-selection process by those seeking to work with IRC. The salaries are low, the hours are terrible, the conditions often insecure, job security is nil, and yet persons of extraordinary talent still compete for positions. They know they will be given great autonomy, maximum support and discretion to adapt programs to changing situations. These opportunities attract the best people, and in turn maximize the cost-effectiveness of the programs.

The values which inspired the IRC's founders are as alive today as they were 60 years ago.

The values which inspired the IRC's founders are as alive today as they were 60 years ago. Motivated by a sense of urgency – that time is of the essence; that rescue brooks no bureaucratic delays; that money is a precious resource to be seen as a trust – to be used as a tool; that refugees matter; and that we can make a difference – the IRC has consistently strived to keep its administrative costs to the bare minimum, while at the same time it has sought to unleash the talents of its staff, provide the best support possible and to maximize its resources. In this way, IRC hopes to be true to the memory of its founders, and to continue a tradition of dedicated public service in the cause of refugees.

ROBERT P. DEVECCHI
Executive Director
International Rescue Committee

IN MEMORIAM

Two dedicated UNHCR staff members have been killed in Ethiopia.

On 11 March, Tekuye Mulie, a UNHCR guard, was murdered while trying to defend the organization's Jijiga office from bandits who stole radio equipment. He was 27.

Mulie, who is survived by his wife and one child, joined UNHCR in 1988.

On 31 March, Lourenco Mutaca, head of UNHCR's field office at Dire Dawa, was gunned down in his vehicle.

Mutaca, 56, left a wife and four children.

Hours before his death Mutaca told a co-worker after being stopped by gunmen at a roadblock, "I never felt so near to death as today."

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata expressed shock and deep sorrow over the loss of these "precious lives."

Following the deaths, Mrs. Ogata ordered the suspension of UNHCR's operations in southeastern Ethiopia.

UNHCR's Staff Council said the murder of the two workers "highlights once again the dangers faced by UNHCR staff in the field while performing their humanitarian work."

Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said the killings illustrated the dangers faced by United Nations staff members who "risk their lives in the search for peace."

Some 15 relief workers have been killed in Ethiopia in recent months.

FEATURES

STAFF ECHOES

Amid sterile reams of project descriptions, budgets, cables and gobbledegook reports, they struggle to the surface of the filing tray.

Two letters from the High Commissioner to the staff (August and December 1981) emerge from the suffocating mound of verbiage.

Deceptively chatty and unassuming, the missals strike a chord. Adam's ale to the parched.

The message is clear-cut.

"The more I see the problem, the more I talk to people inside and outside the office, the more I feel that we have got to be dynamic, resourceful and innovative, and of course the challenge is to do that without losing sight of our fundamental goal of protecting refugees."

So are the means.

"... the most important resource of UNHCR (is) its staff. ... I am doubly convinced of that."

"Everywhere, I have been impressed by the quality and ... commitment of our people."

Indeed, committed they are, in the face of shocking belligerence emanating variously from authorities, refugees, common criminals and nature itself.

And in the face of bureaucracy, home grown.

As committed as the guard and field officer, both brutally murdered (Ethiopia) defending UNHCR property ... in separate incidents (is that ... three, or four, violent staff deaths about which we ought to have been outraged over the last 18 months?).

Or as the *Chargé de Mission* and staff whose lives have been repeatedly threatened (Guatemala).

Resourceful as the lad in the bush (Kenya) who, lacking a bed, found a door upon which to rest his weary bones for an evening waking, albeit stiffly, at the crack of dawn to face the plight of multitudes of refugees, and this for all of three months without respite.

Or as the representative and field officer abused, beaten and kicked (Jordan).

Not to mention the protection officers kidnapped, and humiliated, including being smeared across the face with excrement.

Or their female colleague, living in a shack, at times under gunfire, devoid of even a latrine (Honduras).

As committed perhaps as those working in 45 degrees centigrade under canvas among rodents, serpents and scorpions (Iraq) and so on *ad nauseum*.

Dozens of examples exist.

Over-dramatization is neither productive nor warranted. Thus, suffice it to say that field conditions, including personal security, can be deplorable.

Staff morale, however, isn't. A rather tawdry cliche now, pregnant with "*sous entendu*," it has been bandied around as a synonym for our general despondency, disorientation or simply "being down."

The evidence does not tarry in giving the lie to that fallacy. "The problem," if it exists, is neither staff nor their tenaciously buoyant morale. Yes, there are "bad eggs" and "deadwood," but luckily the exception. Most are capable and willing.

Let's face it, however, a problem does exist. Despite manifest commitment and resourcefulness, much more could be achieved to the benefit of refugees. Even ... at times, people die needlessly.

So where is it going wrong?

The letter continues "... a weighty organization we cannot afford." More than one metric ton of photo-copies every three working days is, we must humbly confess, weighty. Over seven tons a month. Seventeen million copies at Headquarters alone in 1981, 67,000 per working day ... one copy per refugee, and a sprinkling for new arrivals, annually.

Seventeen million copies are the product of a mentality, which begets structures, procedures and institutionalized habits. Dynamic and innovative, they aren't. Costly, they are, in terms of the only valid criteria, i.e. refugee well-being.

And the person-hours, nay days on end of frustration grappling with the monster, this collective madness, painfully kneading paper back into protection and assistance ... a gargantuan mind-numbing, exasperating and wasteful exercise. That is the problem.

"... the world changing so clearly. We must anticipate and adjust ourselves to these changes ... we must move along, be imaginative and innovative."

As the dinosaur, adapt or perish.

Authority and accountability are central to this change. Staff know what they must do. Why on earth should we fear systematic delegation (thus eliminating layers of bureaucracy), dreading to confer upon the hundreds of capable and willing souls the authority and accountability commensurate with their not insignificant salaries?

"VIVA ACNUR (UNHCR)", the returnees chanted in El Salvador, the letter relates ... no fools they to wish us longlife, though illusions as to our shortcomings they most certainly haven't. Protection, very survival, is their daily challenge.

To meet it efficiently is our daily responsibility.

JOHN TELFORD
Emergency Preparedness and Response Section
General

REFUGEE VOICES

Minda Makasa, a 27-year-old Ethiopian who resettled in the United States three years ago, recently walked into the UNHCR office in Washington D.C. and donated $1,000 to help other refugees in the Horn of Africa. Working as a night cleaner in a downtown hotel, he had carefully saved his dollars for months. "It will not pay for all the money UNHCR spent on me for four years in refugee camps, but it shows I appreciate the help they gave me," he explained.

This is his story:

"I was nine years old when the Marxists took power. The revolution hurt me from the beginning. The government took my family's land. My father had a coffee plantation and five houses in the Hararge region in eastern Ethiopia. He also bought coffee and other products from the peasants and sold them in the city. The Marxists stopped his business. It's the way of a revolution.

"With nothing left my father started to go a little crazy. A doctor gave him medicine for his mental problem but he got more and more depressed. One night he woke up, grabbed a big knife and stabbed my mother and brothers. He killed my mother and wounded my brothers. The police came and took him to prison. That night was the revolution for my family. I was 13 years old.

"After my father was imprisoned I kept moving. I never stayed

Makasa repaying the people who helped

more than two years in one place. First, I went to live with my older sister in Bahir Dar. She was a textile worker.

"When I was 15 or 16 years old, I went to the capital city, Addis Ababa. At first I stayed with relatives. I kept going to school.

"In Addis, I met people who followed the Protestant religion. I started to believe in the religion and moved into a church. The trouble was that the churches were supposed to be closed. The government was against this kind of religion. So, I moved again. If you have a problem, you have to change.

"I travelled to Dire Dawa, a center of trade. We nicknamed it 'Taiwan.' I finished 12th grade there. After I finished 12th grade, I volunteered to go to a remote part of Ethiopia for four months to teach illiterate people how to read and write. It was fun.

"When I came back to Dire Dawa, I had more difficulty with officials. The principal of my school refused to give me a graduation certificate. I had two problems. In Ethiopia, you had to study Marxism and Leninism in the youth association. The head of the youth association controlled everything. If he refused to give you a support paper, you couldn't get a graduation certificate and you couldn't get into university. The youth association wouldn't give me a support paper. Without an I.D. you can't do anything. My second problem was religion. I didn't want to stop my belief. I could go nowhere in Ethiopia. I had to move.

"One day I woke up and took a bus to Jijiga. I studied a map and saw that Somalia was to the east. The next morning I faced the sun and started walking. I walked through the bush. When the sun set, I tried to follow the stars. At 9 p.m., after 15 hours of walking, I fell asleep in a cornfield. Some hours later I had a dream that I would be in Somalia in an hour. I thought it was a messenger from God telling me to keep going. I started walking again.

"I stuck bushes in my pants and shirt to help me hide from Ethiopian soldiers. I looked like a tree. All of a sudden, Somali soldiers shouted at me and ordered me to stop. I didn't understand their language. They took me to the nearest town and kept me in a small hostel for one week. They wanted to be sure I was not a spy.

"After a week, the soldiers put me in the nearest camp for economic refugees. There was no food, no shelter. I stayed a few days and then snuck out of the camp in the early morning.

"I walked towards the city of Hargeisa. Five hours later, a car stopped and took me to the city. In Hargeisa I went to a restaurant, ordered food and ate it. I told the cashier I had no money. I had hoped he would call the police who would take me to prison so that I could arrange things. But the manager felt sorry for me. He let me eat for free. He was kind.

"In the street I saw some people fighting. When the police came, I followed them to the jail and talked to the prison guards. They let me stay with the prisoners. They gave me food.

"The Somali official who dealt with refugees talked to me and got mad because I had left the economic refugee camp. He finally took me to the nearest political refugee camp, Adi Adas, where I stayed for six months in a tent. There was no hope. I didn't know what to do. Finally I decided to go back to Ethiopia.

"I started walking again. I got just near the border when the Somali police caught me. To save myself, I told them I was a soldier fleeing Ethiopia. They took me to another refugee camp. It was a very bad place. Most of the people there were soldiers.

"There was one good thing. I met a UNHCR legal officer in the camp. She came once a month. She did what she could for us. She got resettlement for some of us; she helped others repatriate. I told her my whole story. I was tired of lying.

"The head of UNHCR was John Moses Okello. He was a religious person. I told him my beliefs. He gave me money and helped me work out my problem with the Somali government. It was a big relief to me. Okello let me stay in his house and work as a guard. There are lots of nice people, but he is the nicest person I have ever met.

"UNHCR put me in a special group of political refugees. I filled out a resettlement form. An American immigration officer interviewed me. The main question was whether I was an economic or political refugee.

"The International Rescue Committee (IRC) sponsored me in the United States. I arrived on 3 April 1989. On 4 April, they took me to apply for a job. The next week I started working in the laundry at the Four Seasons Hotel. I transferred to night cleaning so I could study during the day.

"I have been helped by many people. I want to give something back. I'm trying to pay back the people who helped me. I gave the $1,000 for Somali refugees in Ethiopia because I want to say thank you to the Somalis who let me stay in their camps for years."

Minda Makasa lives austerely in a small, sparsely furnished one-room apartment in Washington D.C. Nevertheless, he also gave $500 to the IRC to help other refugees resettle in the United States.

VICKI BUTLER

There was one good thing. I met a UNHCR legal officer in the camp. She came once a month. She did what she could for us. She got resettlement for some of us; she helped others repatriate. I told her my whole story. I was tired of lying.

AN EXTRAORDINARY INITIATIVE FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

It's not every day that UNHCR receives a $12-million contribution from the private sector. But, thanks to the efforts of Akio Morita, Chairman of Sony Corporation, and a group of Japanese philanthropists that amount was raised in order to strengthen the resources and flexibility of the High Commissioner in facing the ever-increasing number of unpredictable emergencies.

Under the auspices of Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations) and Keidanren Chairman Gaishi Hiraiwa, Morita played a key role in the drive last year to form the Japan Committee for Refugee Relief, bringing together nearly 100 personalities - artists, businessmen, writers, scholars and industrialists.

Sony Corporation was the first to donate to the Relief Fund, which can be used for emergency projects designated by High Commissioner Sadako Ogata. Sony made a contribution of $3 million and Chairman Morita offered a personal contribution of 1 million yen.

"The appointment of Mrs. Ogata as High Commissioner considerably increased the awareness of the Japanese people, including the business community, of the extraordinary challenges involved in extending protection and assistance to 17 million refugees," Morita said. "Several of us got together and decided to do something to help Mrs. Ogata's work.

"It didn't take us long to realize that what she needed most was money," he added. "We learned she needed funds that she could utilize quickly, in any emergency situation, without first cutting through a lot of red tape."

With the agreement of Committee members, Mrs. Ogata allocated $2 million from the fund to provide adequate shelter for Kurds returning to northern Iraq during an extremely harsh winter. Another $1 million has been allocated for urgently needed relief items and food for the tens of thousands of civilians displaced by war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mrs. Ogata has released $100,000 for the purchase of prefabricated warehouses to improve UNHCR's emergency capacity throughout the world.

The High Commissioner also is studying other proposals aimed at assisting returnees during the Decade of Voluntary Repatriation that began in 1992.

Akio Morita said that the Japan Committee for Refugee Relief hopes eventually to become international. "We are talking to people in other nations, particularly to leaders in the business and finance communities, about joining forces to make further funds available to the High Commissioner's programs," he said. "We cannot leave the problem of resolving the plight of millions of homeless on all continents to governments alone".

UNHCR and the world's 17 million refugees would like to thank those who have contributed so generously. Among the thousands who reached deep into their own pockets were:

ADC Research Institute, Washington, D.C.
Eliana Agazzi, Monza
Chizuko Akagi, Kanagawa
Amnesty International, Rovereto
Haruhisa Arayoshi, Aichi
Associazione Copos Volontari, Genova Bolzaneto
Associazione di Solidarieta Popolare, Livorno
Dorus Augustin, Garges les Gonesse
Sergio Avanzini, Casalmaggiore
Marguerite Badier, Genève
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Yoshio Watabe, Hyogo
Geneviève Weidmann, L'Isle
Adam Mary Wodarczyk, Chicago
Yaeko Kirino, Saitama
Yoko Takenouchi, Tokyo

In some ways, becoming a refugee makes life desperately simple.

And empty. No home, no work, no decisions to take today. And none to take tomorrow. Or the next day.

Refugees are the victims of persecution and violence. Most hope that, one day, they may be able to go home. Or, at least, be allowed to rebuild their lives in a sympathetic environment. To exist again in more than name.

UNHCR is there to help refugees. Your attitude can be the difference between hope and despair.

We need your help to help refugees.

UNHCR ACTION
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UNHCR
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees